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Interpreting the Multicultural through the Women in Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid*

“From Delhi, the North-East was like a map of mountains and rivers on another planet.”
— *Stupid Cupid*

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Abstract

A society is formed out of a totality of individuals; everyone not necessarily belonging to the same background or culture. It is this multicultural aspect of society that makes the process of living within it so much dynamic. The Indian society is known for its unity in diversity and a city like Delhi with its burgeoning influence in terms of its vast geographical structure, the opportunities on the work front and that of its being the Capital of India, make it one of the most sought after cities for people coming from the other parts of India. Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid* is a novel which delineates the notions of cultural crisis faced by the people of Arunachal Pradesh who seek refuge and make Delhi their home. The female protagonists from the northeast region and their somewhat failed relationships with their north Indian counterparts hold the crux of the novel. The paper seeks to represent the ideas of the multicultural by analyzing the relationships between the different characters within the novel. It attempts to show how a society is inherently multicultural, how the cultural diversities in turn make a society beautiful and also how the multicultural aspect enable the people belonging to different regions of the country, come together and bridge the gap that persists within.

Key Words: Multiculturalism, Beliefs, Social Habits, Women

Culture, the very word strikes as dynamic and connoting ideas which are an amalgam of subtle differences, be it language, beliefs, attitudes, religion, cuisines, social habits, music, arts and so on, amidst the human society. It is the essence which holds the world; we dwell in it and live by its dictates. Mamang Dai's second novel, *Stupid Cupid* is much more than what the title or its cover suggests; it is rather very beautifully written, embellished with all the pleasant details of the daily happenings in the lives of all the characters in the novel and especially, the protagonist or narrator, Adna. Adna's roots were located in the greens and

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mountains of Arunachal Pradesh and she, in the pursuit of a better living, comes and settles in the national capital, Delhi. Delhi, for Adna smells of hope and everything nice and utopian. Although the novel is more about Delhi, the presence of Arunachal Pradesh as an essence is always felt for Adna never forgets her roots and is very proud of her culture. She opens a guest house catering to the needs of lovers and friends, located on a quiet lane in South Delhi. Opening prospects for her kith and kin from the hills, Adna makes place for Yoyo and Jia, both young and energetic humans.

They say Delhi is a very rude city... And it's so polluted! All the history is gone. It is a crumbling city. There is no more culture. I also heard all of this back then. But all the people saying these things were people from other states who, despite their dislike of the place, fought for their jobs and their living quarters, and their travel and recreation and every other thing that would entitle them to live in the city. It was the same for me. (Dai 12)

Adna's friend, a married man, is another reason for her leaving her roots to embark upon this new venture in Delhi. The present day society is such that multiple cultures are seen to come together to form one whole. Therefore, when Adna shifted to Delhi, she brought with her the traits of her native culture. It is in her friend Amine that Adna found a home as Amine, her childhood friend, lived in Delhi with her husband, Rizvi. Amine helped her refashion her deceased aunt's bungalow into a new space for entertaining guests. The Four Seasons Hotel is an effort to let young couples relax and enjoy some moments of love, belonging and of living life without regrets. She first employed Yoyo, her distant cousin and it is with the coming of Jia, that Adna's life became a little more relaxing. Jia is a young girl who wrote columns for the local daily in the hills. The descriptions of Jia's arrival evoke the strong sense of their cultural difference they brought, from the bustling city of Delhi:

My cousin arrived by train with a sack of rice and an assortment of bundles and plastic packets full of home-made preparations. She was named after a river, but she gave the impression of a rock jutting out of the water as she bore down on me, lugging her bags. I noticed a few people looking. She was short and square and dressed in the most improbable clothes—a bright sarong that flapped audibly and which appeared to be tangled against her sandals at the heels. In our hometown she would have been another typical, stolid, intractable tribal woman living in some unknown village, had it not been for the fact that Jia was a reporter who wrote articles that were anti everything. (Dai 26)

The above lines show how very different these people from the hills were from the cosmopolitan outlook of the city. Jia, too felt a bit out of place in the crowded city of Delhi for the first words she uttered upon reaching the city were, “What a lot of people! I have never seen so many people in my life! Where do they bury them? When they die, I mean...” (Dai 27). The city is a complete contrast to their simple and serene lifestyle at the hills. The

narrator explains all the tiny details of surviving in the city and the most that terrified or rather shocked Jia is when she is told that they will have to buy water to drink. That was not the scenario back in Itanagar. Another contrast comes with the fact that the women in the hills did works completely related to the soil and household chores. But, here in the city, women are independent and engaged in corporate sectors, fulfilling every bit of their desire to stand on their own feet.

‘Oh, the North-East is a different country altogether,’ there was an exodus from our parts to Delhi, as if the revelation of differences has cast a spell on us all, and we were turned into a motley caravan of pilgrims eager to reach the capital. There were so many of us in the city now, from Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, from Arunachal, Assam, Manipur and Sikkim, and we mingled with others from every small town and settlement of the country. We could have opted for a different life, been some place else, but there it was. We landed up in universities and training institutes, shared flats and hostels, and focussed on study, career, chance, opportunity and all the rest that the city offers to anyone. (Dai 13-14)

The city is hence, portrayed as the confluence of different tribes coming together to settle amidst its core. The women characters and their relations to their male counterparts from the city also show a confluence of emotions emerging between two different cultures. Mareb’s relationship with Rohit and Adna’s relationship with her married friend show how very new and hazy these relationships are in the present time. With not much certainty to boast of, both these relationships evoke a whole new idea of two cultures coming together yet repelling each other. Both Mareb and Adna represent the other type of tribal women from the Northeast, they are independent and at the same time do not cater to the prescribed norms of their society. Migrating to Delhi helped them understand and somehow partially fulfil their desires as well as enabled them to escape from the patriarchal, traditional, familial expectations of their tribal society. The elders of their village always warned them about the cruelties of the city and instead asked them to get married and settle in the localities. But, Adna is different in her outlook towards life; she is liberal and wishes to be a part of the city which brings forth prejudices amongst the elders in her community. The following words from the text reveal how coming to Delhi is a different sort of experience altogether for Adna:

... this anonymity was the very thing I liked. After the watchful expectations of a small town, being a total stranger among strangers was a relief and a pleasure... I like the heavy evenings, filled with diesel fumes and smoke, and the heat burning our faces... dusty trees in full bloom... Coming out of restaurants we would stand under the trees and puff at our cigarettes. It was all very different from where I came. (Dai 14)

However, Adna’s dream of a freedom and escape in Delhi is only an illusion for her migration does not guarantee her a complete freedom from the patriarchal norms and also

their marginalised status. This is also made clear through the actions of the city dwellers. The very idea of migration brings forth questions on the identity of the northeast women. It is to be acknowledged that women’s experiences of oppression are varied when it comes to oppression done on the basis of patriarchal norms. Dai, in *Stupid Cupid* highlights the huge gap that exists between a migrant woman’s aspirations and expectations from the city and the inherent reality.

The distinction between male and female is everywhere a basic building block of social organisation, and most societies have far more elaborate and differentiated expectations of behaviour appropriate to the sexes than do contemporary western societies... every society recognises relations of marriage and kinship, and attaches normative expectations to the roles of husbands and wives, parents and children and often many additional relationships within extended families... The fact of difference is universal and so is its recognition. (Barry 19)

Adna and Mareb are both blinded by their illusory love for their illicit partners. They are both starry-eyed when they first set foot on the city, falling in love with non-tribal men from Delhi. Both of them are representative of the modern women who do not conform to traditions and strongly believed love is not to be tainted by culture, religion or any such thing. For instance, cross cultural marriages are not a part of the tribal culture, and so, Mareb married a man from her native place, but still loved her non tribal mate from Delhi and in the case of Adna, she completely left her home to unite with her married friend, whom she loved the most. Both these relationships defy the dictates of the society and hence, they pose a challenge to the culture of both the women back in Itanagar. In the northeast tribal societies, people who marry outside their religion or community are never acknowledged and rather, such marriages are disowned or looked down upon with contempt. Adna mentions the story of her own aunt, who married outside the community and who was never ever mentioned in the family again. Mareb’s story on the other hand is different, for she is trapped in a marriage conforming to her community’s standards, yet she is unable to love her husband, Dayud. She too clings to her desires for Rohit and is devastated and trapped in her own labyrinthine walk through life. Adna’s own love story is such that her married friend never talks of taking their relationship beyond what is already there. Although not clearly mentioned in the novel, yet there is a subtle hint that Adna’s friend later deserts her in the end. Adna’s fate is hence, sealed by her status of being a north-eastern and therefore, she is deceived in love and her castle of illusion perishes, thus.

The question of race is also addressed in the novel which in turn helps articulate the idea of the multicultural. “To speak of cultural racism is to insist on an image of racial difference which is not natural or biological but contained in language, religion, tradition, national origin; it is to stress the fact that for the racist, the culture of the Other, irreconcilable with his own, may constitute a threat to his cultural identity” (Werbner 141-142). Racism defines the migrant

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experiences of north eastern people dwelling in Delhi. Women in Delhi from the North-east are more adversely affected by its essence. The north east migrants are seen as being different from their North Indian counterparts and are hence viewed as ‘others’. Although there are many other communities in India which are discriminated against on the grounds of religion, caste and ethnicity, yet their nationality and origin are not as much questioned as those belonging to the North-East. These other communities have the freedom to merge with the North Indians in ways that the North-east migrants can never do. In *Stupid Cupid*, there are many instances of such kind of discrimination, one instance will be the time when Adna’s cousin Jia and her friend TD try to hire a cab for themselves and a rude woman dumps herself in the back seat and refuses to give up the cab. As if not satisfied with taking away their rightful place in the cab, the woman blurts out a very racist remark, “Hey you! Jao! Jao! Go back to your own... Desh!” (Dai 52). This comment highlights the way the north-easterners are thought of by the city-dwellers in Delhi and it also poses a question regarding their nationality.

Cultural diversity creates a climate in which different cultures can engage in a mutually beneficial dialogue. Different artistic, literary, musical, moral and other traditions interrogate, challenge and probe each other, borrow and experiment with each other’s ideas, and often throw up wholly new ideas and sensibilities that none of them could have generated on their own... communities educate and even ‘civilize’ each other provided, of course, that none is too overbearing and self-righteous to welcome criticism. (Parekh 168).

Thus, Delhi is a city full of varied aspects related to cultures coming together and trying to match to the standards of the city. From culture, the very idea of the multicultural emerged and Bhikhu Parekh in his essay, *Political Theory and the Multicultural Society*, expresses the idea of cultural diversity taking up different forms in a modern society. The three most common forms are: first, the members of a society, even though they share broadly, a common culture; yet, subtle differences are found amidst their beliefs and practices. For instance, the gays and lesbians, youth cultures and those who follow unconventional standards of living, like the Punks (Dick Hebdige on Subculture) embody this first form and this phenomenon is termed as subcultural diversity. Secondly, a society consists of members who tend to criticise the central, dominant principles and values of a culture and thereby trying to reconstitute it, fall under the category of perspectival diversity. These kinds of members seek to challenge the existing basis of culture and how to reconstitute the distinct perspectives or values already existing in the culture. An instance, from this segment will be the feminists, the environmentalists, the religious groups and the people of African/ Caribbean origins who take up a certain aspect from the society which they believe need to be given some radical thoughts. The third form of cultural diversity is that which includes the newly arrived immigrants, such long established communities like the Jews, the Amish and the

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Gypsies, and various religious communities that are well organised, entertaining as well as living by different systems of beliefs and practices. This form is called communal diversity. Therefore, Multicultural societies are those which include two or more cultural communities.

Mamang Dai’s novel, *Stupid Cupid* has bits of all the three forms of multicultural experiences that exist in a modern society. From emotions to the very idea of a person’s physical appearance, everything falls under the umbrella term of culture, because that which is visible also connotes the very idea of culture. Women are hence, more burdened with the load of the cultural baggage and Adna, Mareb, Jia, and even Amine, who is killed in the end are also victims of cultural differences, a culture newly emerging amidst the younger punks. The drug business is another variant of sub-culture as it works in the underground and captures the mind of distressed youths, enslaving them to possibilities incomprehensible. Therefore, a society is inherently multicultural and it is the cultural diversities which make things beautiful at the same time acts as a barrier to the merging of denizens belonging to the peripheral spaces.

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