

Cultural Amalgamation of Cosmopolitanism in
Rita Dove's *The Yellow House on the Corner*

M. Kalai Nathiyal and Dr. V. Malarkodi



Rita Dove

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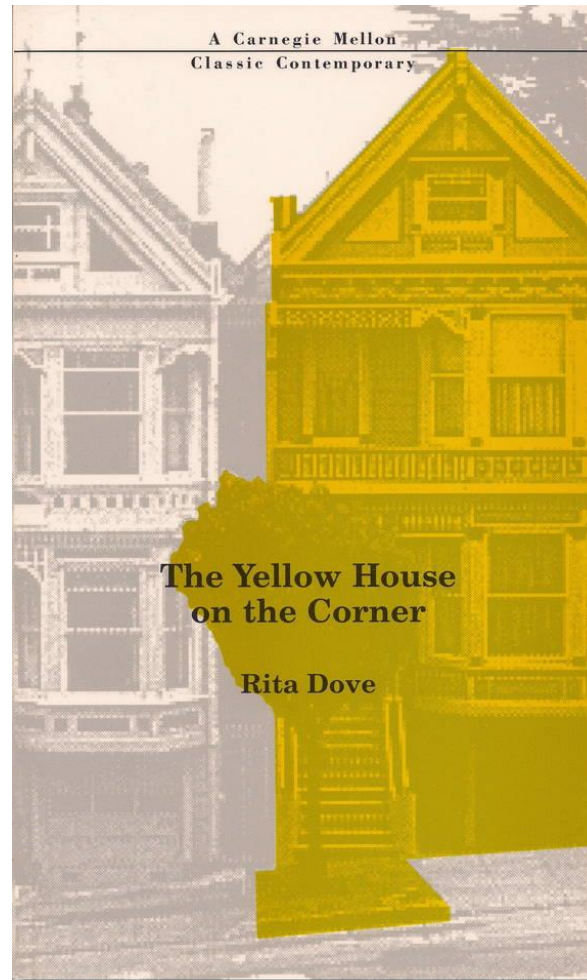
Abstract

This paper presents a brief study of cultural amalgamation of cosmopolitanism as found in the *The Yellow House on the Corner* by Rita Dove. Cultural amalgamation describes not only race and culture, but it also focuses on contextualization of language and indigenous and international cultures. Cultural amalgamation happens when two cultures mix to form a new culture. Cosmopolitanism which involves unpacking the two entangled concepts, universality and personal experience, equally resonates with African American literature.

Keywords: cultural amalgamation, cosmopolitanism, African American literature, Rita Dove, *The Yellow House on the Corner*.

Introduction

Rita Dove is a poet and craftsman living in Ohio, who culturally intermingled with other ethnic groups. Cultural amalgamation involves not only race and culture, but it also focuses on contextualization of language and indigenous and international cultures. Cultural amalgamation happens when two cultures mix to form a new culture.



Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is a term often used to describe a citizen of the world: an enlightened individual who believes he or she belongs to a common community or world order, rather than to a set of particular culture and traditions. Hannerz suggests that “The perspective of the cosmopolitan must entail relationships to a plurality of cultures” and that this entails “first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with other” (Hannerz 1990: 239). It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards diverse cultural experiences.

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Cosmopolitanism here represents a desire for, and appreciation of, cultural diversity, which is termed ‘heterophilia’ by Pierre-Andre Tanguieff (citation).

The Yellow House on the Corner

Dove is an African American writer. Her first volume, *The Yellow House on the Corner* was published in 1980. She introduces her cosmopolitan poetry in the figure of the cultural mulatto. It is a collection of poems dealing with an assortment of terms and experiences such as *Cosmopolitanism, adolescence, and romantic encounters* as well as sights into slave history. It was acknowledged well by most critics and it compelled the attention of her peers.

Dove is indebted to the local culture and its tradition, yet seeks for an overarching Universalism that informs these localities, different as they may be. What ultimately counts for Dove is her retrieval of a united humanity.

The Yellow House on the Corner embodies various aspects of the key aesthetic features of the “new Black aesthetic” (NBA), one contemporary articulation of cosmopolitanism. Dove’s volume *The Yellow House on the Corner*, both employs borrowing across race and class lines.

Dove’s *The Yellow House on the Corner* presents poems about the universal experiences of female adolescence. She is intent on constructing and publicly presenting a poetic persona in the face of some interracial censure.

The Yellow House on the Corner is considered to be the addition to the thematic study regarding Cosmopolitanism which involves unraveling the two entangled concepts, universality and personal experience. This work equally resonates with African American literature and writers.

Intimate Spaces

The Persona of young Dove in her childhood lives in her home which is located in Akron, thinking of the outer world within the limitations of the house, which is seen to be floating around in her works. The house is our corner of the world. The house has always been

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seen as Universe, a real cosmos of the world which is described in *Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard 1964, English translation) as:

‘A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house.’

To bring order to these images ... we should consider two principal connecting themes: 1) A house is imagined as a concentrated being. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality . . . Verticality is ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic . . . they open up two different perspectives for a phenomenology of the imagination.” (*Poetics of Space*, p.17)

Juxtaposing Two Cultures

Dove juxtaposes the aspects of two cultures, European and American, in her poems that she posits as the habitation of taking their respective myths, perceiving them as survival strategies. *The Yellow House on the Corner* has won many prizes. She was very careful in handling her themes and structures of the poem, to satisfy her audiences, both mulatto and black. The first three poems of the volume give clear and exact details about the racial and national references but not particularly about African American culture. This makes her place among her peers to be judged by readers, as a Cosmopolitan writer, seeing the way she has depicted culture in the poems *This Life*, *The Bird Frau* and *Robert Schumann*.

The Poem *This Life*

The poem *This Life* expresses the pressure of expectation that strangers bring to one another. Travel seems to be the pleasure of life. Her adulthood has been promoted, as she was loved as a child. The Japanese woodcut engraved is a model of gendered behavior, of feminine passivity.

The female speaker in the poem loves Japanese woodcut and Dove does not mention the race of the speaker. She universalizes the cultures of the human race, as all resemble some unity in following their cultures. It is asserted:

As a child, I fell in love
With a Japanese woodcut
Of a girl gazing at the moon
I waited with her for her lover.
...
Your face, though I don't know it
Our lives will be the same-(Sp)

The poet captures both the fantasy and the real-life uncertainty of the outsider in a situation charged with potential intimacy.

A Suite for Augustus

The final poem of *A Suite for Augustus* is about Black culture. This poem portrays clearly the feminine persona and Augustus in different ways in which they have lived, as it highlights the cosmopolitanism of the feminine persona's cultural identity, in contrast to Augustus' rigid and limited Americanism. The poem starts with the line "Three Years too late, I am scholarshipped / to Europe and back". Too late, that is, to arise to a sophistication that could match the genteelness of Augustus, whose International identifications are confirmed by his landing a year later in Kuwait, a political and business chance that outshines mere education. Lovers are now separated individually, only their memories have tried to rejoin them together. Travel has enabled the speaker to emulate Augustus, but even travel seems to have been more passive for the woman: "scholarshipped/to Europe and back," the pun makes her seem like a package. Her thoughts of Augustus on returning to the United States are mingled with the realization that he might not be thinking of her.

Even though the feminine persona and Augusta have international experiences, they are different in character and education. Because hers is more the educational type, he serves in the military. She has to do all things with culture, knowledge and self-development.

The Yellow House

In *The Yellow House*, Dove's speaker herself becomes the traveler, the one whose quest for understanding of origins and ending, demands that she set out to see things for herself. The result is a wandering poem, a walking tour of the fractured world, during which the speaker ruminates on and then postulates reasons for the unreasonable things she encounters.

Sightseeing

Sightseeing concerns a speaker who has come upon a European church and its inner courtyard of statues damaged during WW II. The villagers have chosen to leave the dismembered statues exactly as they found them after the Allies departed. "Come here," the speaker says to the reader at the poem's beginning, "I want to show you something: What a consort of broken dolls! Look, they were mounted at the four corners of the third floor terrace and the impact from the cobblestones snapped off wings and other appendages. The heads rolled the farthest."

Realizing the scene engenders strong, but various kinds of reactions, the speaker plays upon that ambiguity to establish a dialectic between the mongers of despair and belief, distrusting either extreme. The villagers who locked the gates in the face of this "terrible sign" overlook what the speaker does not: that "good" indeed did prevail over "evil" in the war, that civilization did indeed re-establish order over such chaos. To the speaker, it seems to be heavenly intervention, or heavenly retribution.

To Conclude

All the poems of Rita Dove focused on the issue of dual audience, mulatto cultural imagery, identity and freedom themes, which help her to announce her mulatto poetic persona and her future path as a poet leading the New Black Aesthetic for propelling the culture into her society.

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