In both Ravinder Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), the two youngish protagonists exercise the somewhat eccentric choice of appearing as crones.1 Such a decision arguably resists their patriarchal objectification as exoticized commodities ripe for Western sexual consumption. It is as if these women were, by their very decision to appear culturally invisible, choosing to inhabit an empowered sort of borderland.

Avtar Brah suggests a need to
distinguish between ‘difference’ as a process of acknowledging specificities of the social and cultural experience of a group, ‘difference’ as a contestation against oppression and exploitation, and a situation where ‘difference’ itself becomes the modality in which domination articulates.2

I would like to suggest that the actions of these fictional women not only resist the sorts of phallocentric representation through which the cultural vulnerability of female characters has long been exploited, but that they positively embrace their manufactured crones’ exteriors as successful tools with which to interrogate such oppression and exploitation. This supports Hélène Cixous’s contention that new representations of women are needed to “hail the advent of a new, feminine language that ceaselessly subverts these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallocentrism in an effort to op-

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press and silence women.”\(^3\) To actively choose the invisibility of ageing women is, I am suggesting, an ingenious way of challenging enforced silence. I have entitled this piece “Desexing the Crone” rather than “Desexualizing the Crone” because the title characters – the ‘wicked old woman’ and ‘the mistress of spices’ – take the active decision to appear as ‘desexed’ rather than passively to be identified as ‘desexualized’, which suggests an objectification reeking uncomfortably of colonial patriarchy. Through the canny use of shapeless, second-hand clothes, crumbling make-up, and a redundant walking stick, Randhawa’s stubborn protagonist in \textit{A Wicked Old Woman}, Kulwant, convincingly adopts the posture and outward shell of a disabled, elderly woman. A second-generation Asian Briton, Kulwant 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.”\(^4\) Kulwant represents not only a woman who is resisting the patriarchal gaze but a young Asian-British woman who resists the prospect of having a life resembling those of her mother and aunts. Indeed, she challenges Toril Moi’s contention that “in so far as women are defined as marginal by patriarchy, their struggle can be theorized in the same way as other struggles against a centralized power structure.”\(^5\) Randhawa has created a character who resists not only patriarchy but also the dominant ideology of her family’s expectations of how a good Indian girl should behave.

Divakaruni’s Tilo in \textit{The Mistress of Spices} also challenges her Indian family’s expectations with her decision to reject her heritage and instead to embrace the otherworldly existence of a Mistress of Spices. Urbashi Barat suggests that, like most diasporic novels, Divakaruni’s book 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 the diasporic condition.\(^6\)

Arguably, when the sense of where one stands culturally shifts – as does that of the characters in Randhawa’s and Divakaruni’s novels – so, too, can one use


\(^4\) Randhawa, \textit{A Wicked Old Woman}, 49.

\(^5\) Moi, \textit{Sexual/Textual Politics}, 163.