

An Element of Diasporic Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

¹P. Venkata Ramana, ²Dr. K. K. Sunalini, ³B. Pavan Kumar

¹Research Scholar, Koneru Lakshmiah Education Foundation, Assistant Professor, V. R. Siddhartha Engineering College Kanuru, Vijayawada. chinni.gurrula@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Koneru Lakshmiah Education Foundation, Sunalini12.klu@kluniversity.in

³Assistant Professor, S.R.K.R Engineering College, Bhimavaram, pavankbonda@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims at representing a diasporic element in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Complex experiences of Indians living in the Eastern and the Western countries are frequently represented as the characters who try to assert their glorious Indian culture in terms of plot, diction, imagery, and characterization. The present paper highlights certain issues which revolve around women who search for their identity in the context of diaspora.

The *Mistress of Spices* elevates various incidents which happen in the life of the protagonist who tries to establish her identity in the Oakland. When we observe the life of Tilotthama in the light of her birth and struggle for existence, it is clear that she tries to create her identity and this gains the sympathy of the readers. The novel revolves around the elements of myth and romance. The plot recreates a world of mythology in which spices play a vital role in the lives of the protagonist and the immigrants. The novel focuses on the cultural conflict between the East and the West. When we observe the opening lines of the novel, Divakaruni describes India as a “land of ardent poetry and aquamarine features” (MS3). This sums up the exotic picture of India seen through the eyes of the westerner. The *Mistress of Spices* is about the story of magic in spices as curatives which for therapeutic use wielded by a masquerading of old woman who in reality is young and full of vigor.

Keywords: Diasporic, Identity, immigrants, Culture, Tradition, Therapeutic, vigor.

Introduction

‘Diaspora’ is a Greek word for ‘scattering’ refers to the dispersion of a people from their homeland. A simple and a very common definition of the term Diasporic writing can be explained in a way that a group of people who come from a particular nation in order to establish their own identity and struggle to live in other parts of the world. Thus the word ‘diaspora’ was presented by various women writers who have contributed to the progress of the English literature and presented their own themes representing in the form of Exile, migration, Alienation and cultural identity and ethnicity.

Quest for Identity and nostalgia for the roots are the basic themes of diaspora writers. The roots of Indian Literature in English could legitimately be traced in what has been said in the British and European attempts to understand and interpret India. A lot of hue and cry is raised by nationalist historians who argue that English is not an Indian language and therefore Indians cannot and should not write in English. India, over the centuries, has assimilated so many languages and cultures that it is difficult to call them alien. Sanskrit, Urdu and English have not only been natively contextualized but they have also become a part and parcel of the fabric of Indian reality, its social and metaphysical consciousness. The

historical duration of the art-work may or may not coincide with the duration of the forms they use. Form is relatively a longer continuity in time, sometimes across culture that admits of many changes, alterations, through the passage of time. The ancient man's language was hieroglyphic (A form of writing, especially as used in ancient Egypt, in which pictures or symbols are used to represent objects, concepts or sounds) particularly so in the Indian tradition – with which we have lost touch. The dominant mode of the Indian tradition has been historiographical narrative which has excellently combined with myth to present the existential reality sweeping across all the three worlds. India has had great narrative traditions exemplified by works like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, the Panchatantra and Kathasaritsagar, and many others. Here, Gods combine with human beings, clash with demons in order to sustain a human story.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is Indian born award-winning writer who teaches creative writing at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California, where she also serves as president of MAITRI, a helpline for South Asian women. In her first full-length novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, adopts a more complex strategy for portraying diasporic Identity. She makes use of fable to explore the various kinds of problems encountered by immigrants. In this novel the first-person narrative has been adopted from the perspective of the protagonist name Tilottama represented in the novel as Tilo. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as an Indian diaspora writer largely focused on the various issues of women in the context of diaspora and she also presented their haunted memories of country of origin in her short stories collection "Arranged Marriage". Moreover, she depicts woman as a powerful weapon to destroy the malignance in the society in order to build a rising nation. As our title describes diaspora means struggling oneself to create one's own identity if he/she moves away from homeland. Likewise, Divakaruni's characters, especially her heroines find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their culture and religion. Her characters struggle a lot in balancing their lives of domestic responsibilities.

Diasporic Identity

In *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni highlights the element of Diasporic identity through the character Tilo, who migrated to Oakland, California and runs a spice bazaar and also she acquires magical powers and with those powers she cures the psychological and physical disorders. Even though she is an Indian, she herself creates an identity in Oakland and she also appears in Indian attire as she respects the Indian culture and tradition. Tilo often impresses various people over there by curing their disorders. In this novel the first person narrative has been adopted from the perspective of Tilo or Tilotama, who has trained to extract the essence of the spices and make them to alleviate pain, solve problems and help people live better lives. *The Mistress of Spices* -the deliberate gendering of the word to under cut the power associated with mastery supernatural powers is to be noted. She can presage disasters and look into the hearts of people, only in her hands "the spices sang back", her trainer, the 'old one', had told her signifying that Tilo would never be the submissive, compliant mistress that she was expected to be. But Tilotama or Tilo as she calls herself, is not infallible sometimes the problems of the Diaspora are too convoluted for her to deal with.

Tilo runs a spice store in Oakland, California. Where she has re created little India which boasts of all the spices that ever were even the lost ones. "I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other places in the world quite like this" (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, 2005, P.3) She says of her store which attracts a large group of people for whom the place is reminiscent of home, a little oasis in their diasporic lives fraught with problems. *The Mistress of spices* feels that the Indians come to her store in quest of happiness: "All those voices, Hindi, Assamese, Urdu, Tamil, English, layered one on the other like notes from tanpura, all those voices asking for happiness except no one seems to know where". (Dr.G.B.Gavani, 2011, Article) But even within the structure of the fable Divakaruni has underscored opaque nature of national borders.

Feminist sensibility and quest for identity are the major themes of Divakaruni which reflected in the said famous work "The Mistress of

spices". The Mistress of Spices is allowed by the powers that be to work magic only for the good of her own Indians. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need', the first mother, the senior perceptor, had warned her National boundaries become aggressive, all important in the Diaspora, as a way of defining identity, aliminality that marks the contours of one's experience, a platform for resisting co-optation by the dominant/hegemonic discourse. The spice store with its sacred, secret shelves functions as a geographical/textual space that is the repository of a monolithic national identity. The Mistress of spices is the benign spirit who hovers over Indians living in America. But for Divakaruni, assuaging the pain of diasporic life is more complex. Jaggi (Jagjit) is estranged and racially marked. A timid child, he is assaulted at school for not knowing English, for not belonging: "Talk English son of a bitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole".(Diwakaruni, 2005,P 39)

Tilo's attempts at restoring confidence to the little boy combined with the pressures to conform transforms him into an aggressive young man who has been offered protection by a group of boys. In exchange they have asked him to 'carry this packet here, drop off this box there'. Jaggi is carrying out his duties conscientiously waiting to turn fourteen when he will get his coveted gift: "cold and black, shining and heavy with power in (his) hand, pulsing electric as life, as death (his) passport into real America." Tilo is shocked and wonders whether it is her spice-remedy, Jaggi's parents or America that have driven him to become a drug trafficker, who is perhaps on his way to becoming an armed gangster. The little boy has become Jagjit by getting his back on those 'jeering voices, the spitting mouths, the hands; in the playground that had assaulted him. For every immigrant who makes it in America, assimilates and prospers economically.

The Mistress of Spices offers a close look at a wide spectrum of Indians residing in the diaspora. Like in the composition of any community Indians too have the rich diasporic for whom perhaps the immigrant experience has been one of cultural dispossession and material acquisition. In the novel the protagonist, Tilo, the ministering angel, is more concerned with those who need her help. In

continuum with the title, each chapter is named after a spice and discusses the trails and tribulations of an individual and the special characteristics of the spices for instance: "Each spice has day special to it..... Color of daybreak and conch-shell sound. Turmeric the preserves, keeping foods safe in a land of.....heat and hunger. Turmeric the auspicious spice, placed on the....over coconuts at pujas, rubbed into borders of wedding saris." (Diwakaruni, 2005, P 13) Thus, the reader gets the glimpses of spices into a range that surrounds the life of the diasporic Indian. Mrs. Ahuja's story is a story of dispossession. She left the settled, comfortable life at her father's house, when she was married to a violent man, an alcoholic who abuses her. Unhappy in domestic life, she wants to start again in America, but she cannot drown out those voices of conditioning that outlined womanly duties for her, 'the voices, we carried them all the way inside our heads'. 10 The Mistress's tools can dismantle Ahuja's house but only when she, herself, is ready for the challenge; the Mistress helps Mrs. Ahuja She becomes Lalita by overthrowing the tyrannical structures that have weighed her down, compelled her to be brutally raped night after night by her husband. Lalita leaves her husband and seeks refuge at a battered women's shelter. For Geeta, Tilo mixes several ingredients, ginger for deeper courage, fenugreek for healing breaks and 'amchur' for deciding right. Geeta's Predicament stems from the fact that, she is part of a paradigmatic diasporic family, where a clash between the first generation and second-generation South Asians is inevitable. Her parents have 'given' plenty of independence, but they cannot accept her boy friend. In fact, they are horrified that, she would choose to be with a Chicano man and cut her off completely. Geeta, the second generation South Asian is not prepared for this volt face; she is shocked by the elements of reaction to Juan.

Thus, this novel does not just deal with the mystic nature of Tilo, but it goes into the transcendental world which means deeper than the surface reading. It also questions one major issue of hybrid identity in a foreign country. The story reveals the character of Tilottama, the main protagonist living in two cultures, where she is caught between her heritage and her newfound world. The two edges that Tilo find herself caught up is the harsh reality of

immigrant Indians in America. The word "mistress" also denotes of an individual's quest for identity. For representing Tilo's character we can also use the biological term 'Hybrid Identity' which means fusing of different elements or a mixture of different species that form an element of its own. Thus this term justifies the context how the protagonist struggles for creating her own identity with the clash of two cultures. Moreover, Divakaruni highlighted the condition of women in those days with contemporary analysis. Throughout the novel, Tilo is joined by a host of other people who share aspects of life as immigrants, but each has also their own individual story.

Divakaruni portrayed her characters in this novel *The Mistress of Spices* in a way that each one has its own importance either to put efforts in changing their attitudes to stands as better ones in society or to change others to make a strong nation which also helps them to create their own identity in the context of diaspora. Especially when we look at the character named Lalitha, Ahuja's wife who stands for those Indian wives in America sneaking for an identity to come out of the caring eyes of their husbands. Lalitha who broke up with her family life and stands herself as an independent woman symbolizes inspiration to all women. And she also runs a boutique and looks after her parents by keeping herself away from married life. But Tilo always reminding her the right of women to be happy and independent. This is one of best example of how Divakaruni presents different women characters with various problems and complications and finally gave them solutions to become successful humans.

The order of *Mistresses* clearly replicates patriarchal struggles and Tilo must be made to break free of them. She struggles with her own passions as she builds emotional relationship with a Native American man, whom she calls Raven. She transforms herself into a woman, feeling guilty about her "self indulgence", but decides to brave the retribution that she would have to face. At the level of body-politics, Tilo's re-formulations about her body, her desire to have a sexual relationship with Raven outside of institutional sanctions, go against the laws of the order of *Mistresses*. But, Tilo knows the danger, she is in. She can always sense it. Hence, she tells Raven, who wants to

escape with her to an earthly Paradise: "Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, your and mine, of what it is to be Indian, to be American.... There is no earthly paradise. Except that we can make back there, in the soot, in the rubble, in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug dust, the young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and wailing in cells, yes, in the hate, in the fear".

The novel validates women's empowerment through articulation of their desires. As with her Protagonists in the short stories, Divakaruni argues for recognition of women's full control of their bodies. Once Tilo is in touch with her own sexuality, she can no longer assuage others pains or even see into the future, but she can live the life of a young woman. The mistress must extinguish herself in order that the woman find her voice, follow her desires and search for an identity outside of that of a ministering angel. She must leave her domain, the beautiful, organized spice store, to fulfill desire. At the end of the novel, Tilo becomes Maya, the young woman who has abandoned her special powers, I who now have only myself to hold me up". And found her new home through an act of cultural translation. *The Mistress of Spices* adopts a more mature structural configuration to discuss the Diaspora. Each chapter contains a little vignette about an individual, about a cultural encounter.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reflects the racial consciousness in the minds of immigrants which gives feeling of isolation. She often expresses herself in the mode of incomplete identity. Vision of Divakaruni in *Mistress of Spices* is that she constructs the entire phenomenon with the ease and excitement without being a prey to self-imposed otherness, often found in the lives of immigrants and immigrant writers. She represents every character struggling to fulfill their dreams and wishes. They are caught in a web of sorrows who in turn helped by Tilo's Indian spices. The narrator completely justifies the character of Tilo, the protagonist is forced to choose between the supernatural life of an immortal and the imbalances of modern life. She is considered an angel with magical powers. She

is portrayed as a living, breathing reality, one of the outstanding creations by Divakaruni. She is the structural and the magical pivot of the novel. Tilo has to decide which part of her heritage she will keep and which part she will chose to abandon. Tilo's magical power begins to crumble when she is drawn to the mysterious Raven, the lonely American. Tilo is unable to probe into his psyche and breaks all her vows to taste the forbidden fruit. And while 'First Mother' may represent a mythical pull for the security of one's cultural and emotional ties to India the land of birth, the lonely American becomes the call to explore and forge the new identity in America's vast multicultural landscape. Divakaruni shows the power of a woman and highlights the element of Diasporic identity through the overwhelming character named Tilottama.

Discussion with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni."March 1993.

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