



LONGING FOR EXILE AND QUEST FOR SURVIVAL AS PICTURIZED IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE MISTRESS OF SPICES: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper subtly picturizes the immigrant culture and ethnic identity by projecting the experience of unsettlement and dislocation. With a focus on the major diasporas element as multiple identity leading to identity crisis and migration or exile, racial discrimination, conflict or in-between's and native culture and rewriting it. This paper examines in deep the work of Indian women writers have been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. It brings home the point Divakaruni presents the immigrant experience, family, racism, provocative experience and timely observation of marriage by crafting a vivid enduring dream by focusing on family, relationship and also pride in one another's heritage too.

Keywords: *Magical Realism, Feminine Sensibility, Ethnic Community, Nostalgia, Dislocation, Diasporic Consciousness, In-Betweenness, Intertextuality.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American author and poet, born in Kolkata, India in 1956. She has got the nationality of India as well as of the United States. Her works are widely known, because her works got translated into 20 languages, along with Hebrew, Japanese, and Dutch and also integrated in over 50 anthologies. She is no doubt a multifaceted personality playing the role of many in one; She is a professor, novelist, poet, essayist, short-story writer, non-fiction writer, children's fiction writer, book reviewer, columnist, and of course a very good wife and a mother also. She belongs to a very traditional, middle-class family of Kolkata. She spent almost 18 years of her life in her homeland with her family. She lived there till 1976, and at the age of 19 she came to the United States. But things were not that much easy for her. To continue her higher studies she did a lot of odd jobs. She sustained her education in the realm of English by receiving Master's Degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. But to get established in a very new place was a little tough for her, that's why, she earned money for her own education. She held many odd jobs like babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, washing instruments in a science lab, and slicing bread in a bakery. All these are the experiences of her life which made her realize her own identity. She did her Ph.D. in 1985 from the University of California at Berkeley. What has to be understood rather clearly is that almost all her rich educative experiences got very much reflected in her literary creations.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni started her writing career as a poet. She has also won a number of awards for her poems. Her Major novels include *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *Vine of Desire* (2002), *Sister of my Heart* (1999), and *Mistress of Spices* (1997) which all won universal acclaim. In addition to, all these academic achievements, Divakaruni has also given her contribution in non-profit works. When she was living in India, she was totally immersed in the culture. She never thought about women's rights or their problems. Her coming to the U.S. gave her the distance that needed to look back on her culture. She studied cautiously the lives of other women around her who are Indians. The author also observed that many of them were still wedged into the old value system that a man has control over them and she assumes superiority. In 1989 and 1990, she approached several women who were victims of abuse. The fact is that, they were unfamiliar with working of American Society. She realized all these problems and decided to help them. Maitri is an organization which was founded by Chitra Banerjee in 1991, with the help of a small group of friends.

Divakaruni occupies an important place in the current literary scenario. Her novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) was released as a film of the same name in 2005. In addition, her novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) was made into a television series in Tamil. The contribution of the Indian writers, especially women writers, to the development of the literature is an important issue and deserves a detailed enquiry. Divakaruni's works are largely set in India and the United States. Her work deals with the immigrant experiences and important matter in the medley of American society. Her creation is varied in all respects, for she has published novels in multiple genres, including historical fiction, fantasy, magical realism, realistic fiction, feminine sensibility, and myths or stereotypes. She deals with shows the struggles, miseries, emotional disturbances and better experiences felt and undergone by women annoying to discover their own identities. Thus, she is measured as an Indian immigrant woman writer or an Indian Diaspora writer also. She works as a volunteer for battered women. Her interest about women's rights began after she left India and then she came to know about the problems of immigrant women. Divakaruni herself says: "Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them, women in love, in difficulty, women in relationship". She has always been paying attention to women's conditions, issues, and desirous of making changes. Thus,



all these features consider her the Indian Immigrant Woman Writer or one can also say an Indian Diaspora Writer. The word "Diaspora" in Greek means, dispersal or scattering of the seeds. The term is primarily used to submit to Jewish scattering, came to be used to pass on to contemporary conditions that involve the experiences of migration, expatriate workers, refugees, exiles, immigrants, and ethnic communities.

However, a distinction can be made between immigrant culture and ethnic identity. A group of immigrants from a particular country are impacted both by the cultural variations among themselves and the culture of the adopted country. Certain elements constitute markers of identity - clothes, food, language, religion, music, dance, legends, myths, customs, individual community, and other. "The Indian Diaspora" means, population outside India, mainly those who have traveled to foreign lands and in the course of time gave up their Indian citizenship. Diasporic consciousness is an intellectualization of an existential condition, a sad condition that is ameliorated by an imaginary homeland to which one hopes one will someday return. Thus, search of identity is perhaps the one recurring theme in the works of Indian Diaspora writers.

Diasporic writings do significantly reveal the experiences of unsettlement and dislocation. The feeling of alienation, nostalgia, confusion, dislocation, fight of identity, sufferings due to discrimination on the basis of race, religion, culture and language culminates into conflicts. Widely accepted and noted author and poet Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, herself is an immigrant, has become the balladeer of the Indian Diaspora, chronicling the struggles, the losses and the tales of reinvention and redemption. She has put into words that millions of immigrants would find hard to articulate. She belongs to that category of Indian Diaspora whose only link with India is their origin.

Divakaruni pins faith in the view and opinion that, she is very much influenced by Mahasweta Devi - an Indian feminist writer. Mahasweta wrote about women's issues long before, which became really dangerous to be written. But more than this a lot of women from different traditions have influenced her as well. At the starting point of Chitra's writing career, she didn't have the confidence that her subject would be of interest to anyone. Her writing nourishes a new light on theme of feminine sensibility, immigrant experiences, fight of identity, homelessness, and the gap between the East and West. When her grandfather would tell her stories from the ancient Indian epics; she got to know about all the prince and princess. The isolation of the epic heroines seemed strange to her. In the sex-isolated traditional society of her grandfather's village, women used most of their day with each other, going in a group to fetch water, working in the fields together, cooking together, and they used to bathe in the women's lake. All these past memories made her realize that the friendship among women is very ancient. But when she read the classic texts and other epics of Indian culture, she was astonished to find few portrayals of companionship among women.

Divakaruni's first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, revolves around, an Indian girl with magical powers. Tilo, the central character, tells how she was trained as 'a mistress of spices' in a faraway land. The major diasporic element in the novel is nothing but multiple identities and resultant identity crisis coupled with cracked images. Many characters in the novel have multiple names which exemplify multiple identity. For instance, the protagonist has five names. She was named as Nayan Tara by her parents, Bhagyavati by the pirates group which kidnapped her, Tilo or Tilottama by the First Mother who had trained her in mastering the power of spices, Maya by Raven, an American, who loved her and the Mistress of Spices by the general public. Raven too has many names. When he met Tilo at the Spices Store she asked him his name for which he replies, "What name shall I tell you? I have had so many" (P152). Regarding his true name he said "I'm not sure I can tell which one it is" (P153). This signifies that Diasporas acquire multiple identities for various reasons.

Another diasporic characteristic in the novel is migration or exile. In the broad sense, the terms 'migration' and 'exile' are used as synonyms, though 'exile' has negative shade to it. Migration may be voluntary or involuntary. Most of the characters in the novel migrate; their migration is voluntary as well as involuntary. For instance, the exile of Nayan Tara from her birth place to the place of pirates is involuntary, whereas her migration from the pirates' place to island of spices and from there to Oakland is voluntary. The migration of Lalita from Khanpur to Oakland is involuntary. She was not ready to marry Ahuja and lead a conjugal life with him. Considering family's reputation and her younger sisters' future she went with Ahuja to Oakland. In Oakland also, she did not have freedom and experienced torture by her husband. In order to get rid of it she went with members of an organization which came to the help of such women. Here, her migration is voluntary. The migration of Haroun, Geeta's parents and grandfather, Hameeda, Shamsur, and Rehamansab is voluntary because all these people had come to the USA in search of job. The migration of these people, through belonging to different regions, communities, castes and speaking different languages, go to Metropolitan Centre in search of job, this just exemplifies postcolonial migration.



Another important diasporic feature is racial discrimination. Several characters in the novel experience the racial discrimination. For instance, Jagjit experienced brutal racial experience. His parents admitted him to a school. He was frightened to go to school because he knew only Punjabi. His teacher put him in the last row. The first English word he learnt is, 'idiot, idiot, idiot' and the second word is 'Asshole' (P38). Even at night also "he lies with his eyes open" seeing "the jeering voices, the spitting mouths, the hands that pull pants down in the playground and the girls looking" (P39). But with the help of Tilo who had offered him cinnamon 'which is the destroyer of enemies' provider of strength to legs, arms and mouth he could resist it. Migrated people are often attacked and cheated by natives. This is well expressed by Haroun. When he saw Tilo kept her store open late in the evening and permitted Raven to search something in the store he said "Lady Jaan, you must be more careful... All kinds of bad people roaming around this neighborhood. Did you read or not in India Post just last week some man broke into one ...shot the owner. His name was Reddy I think. Just because he's dressed all fancy does not mean you can trust him. I've heard of men like that, dress up and pretend they're rich, out to cheat you" (P111). Another Indian Mohan, maintaining a mobile food stall, was stopped by two white men who threw away the stack of paper plates. When he bent down to collect them one of them caught him into arm pit and squeezed him and another one spit at him saying, "soofabitch Indian.

Another important feature of diasporic literature is to reclaim native culture and rewriting it. Through this, Divakaruni wishes to decentre the centre by providing central space to the marginalized knowledge system. It is like elevating the local to the global level and offering local solution to global problems. It also involves deconstruction and rejection of western cannons. By underlining and bringing to light the native natural solutions to emigrants' problems, the author wishes to decolonize the minds of the colonized.

Another feature of diasporic writing is conflict or in-betweenness. Most of the characters are caught between two ways of thinking; western and eastern. Emigrant parents strongly desire to give their children modern English education based on western model but expect them to follow Indian traditions. Consequently such children face the problem of in-betweenness. Since they are born and brought up in host country for them that is the home. But their parents insist that their home-land is India. Willingly or unwillingly they accept it. Thus they do not have single home but multiple homes.

For instance, Geeta's parents bring her up in Oakland, offer her good education, she has got A grades at all levels, till the completion of education she followed her parents' advice. But after getting a job in a company her attitude has changed. Her grandfather does not like her coming home late. He remarks, "If a young girl should work late-late in the office with other men and come home only after dark and sometimes in their car too? Back at Jamshedpur they would have smeared dung on our faces for that" (P85). Geeta loves Juan and wishes to marry him. When her parents oppose it, she leaves home. As everyone expects, she does not go and live with Juan but stays with her friend hoping to convince and get the consent of her parents. Lalita faces the conflict if she should continue to tolerate the torture given by her husband or she should resist and give up her husband. Tilo also experiences conflict at various contexts. As the Mistress of Spices, she is not supposed to touch the hands of any customer. But when Haroun comes and pleads to read his palm she faces conflict and finally takes his palm, into her hands. She is not likely to go out of the spices store but when Geeta's grand-father requests her to go to Geeta's office to convince her. She is caught in conflict, in spite of warning by spices; she takes the risk and goes Geeta's office. So also she goes to the place where Haroun lives and offers him spices. She is not supposed to love anybody but she is drawn to Raven as equally as to spices. She is not likely to use spices for her own sake but in order to acquire attractive look she takes-in Makardwaj, the king of spices, acquires the desired look, goes out with Raven to his palace and spends a night with him.

The novel has, besides the above explored diasporic elements, many more diasporic elements. The novel throws light on several feminist issues also. It is known for its employment of narrative devices like the first person narration, nonlinear plot, shift in time and place, flash back, magic realism, story within story, epistolary method, hybridity of language, intertextuality etc. This novel is full of provocative insights, and timely observation of marriage, racism, family, and the immigrant experience. The story centers around a woman wedged between the real or actual world that is crumbling around her and her mother's infectious or mysterious dream world. Divakaruni has crafted a vivid and enduring dream, one that reveals hidden truths about the world we live in, and from which readers will be reluctant to wake. Divakaruni's talent is not only for good storyteller, but also creating characters that are dynamic and real in one way or another. The focus is on family, relationship, pride in one's heritage, and how one may not truly understand another as well as what really they think.

Like Chitra Banerjee, many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides, matching the pace of the world. They are recognized for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavor of the soil that they bring



to their work. Basically, the work of Indian women writers have been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. Most of these women write about the enclosed domestic space and women's perceptions of their experience within it. The subject matter has often been considered superficial compared to the depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of lower class women. Women were the chief upholds of a rich oral tradition of storytelling, through myths, legends, songs, and fables. Our women writers have grappled with complex issues such as sensuality, society, subjugation, and servility. They have handled them with a sense of balance, never disregarding our Indian traditions, yet discovering that there is more in the offing. Indian women novelists have given a new dimension to the literature.

To conclude, it may be said that the work of Indian women writers is significant in making the society aware of women's demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression and thus, re-writing the history of India. Women writers in India can no longer be claimed as the exclusive property of India. Their work and their art belong to the world.

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