



The Creative Launcher

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Tilo's Coming to Terms with her Conflicting Identity: A Study of Her Displaced Self in *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

The term 'diaspora' was initially used for the displacement of Jews but now it has become an umbrella term for all kinds of displacement from one country to another (be it forced or willing) by people of all cultures and communities. According to Makarand Paranjape, "The diaspora... must involve a cross-cultural or cross-civilizational passage. It is only such a crossing that results in the unique consciousness of the diasporic" (Paranjape 6). The most basic problems experienced by diasporic existence are nostalgia, alienation and the problem of assimilation. While the first generation immigrants suffer from nostalgia, those who belong to second generation or generations after that suffer from the problem of assimilation, i.e. they earnestly desire to get assimilated in their country of adoption and become part of it but their hyphenated identity never leaves them. Alienation is a common feature to all generations of immigrants, first generation immigrants are not one with the new surroundings (emotionally and culturally) and feel alienated whereas the next generations become part of the new culture but are still considered outsiders hence made to feel alienated. This leads to an identity crisis. It is this problem of identity which forms the soul of one's diasporic existence. Divakaruni's protagonist Tilo represents all these aspects of diasporic existence. She does not merely represent these aspects in the life of people but is herself a physical embodiment of diasporic existence. She is both, a person living a diasporic life as well as the diasporic life itself.

Keywords: Alienation, Nostalgia, Diaspora, Existence, Migration, Assimilation, Culture

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an author of Indian diaspora and she is established in America. Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* is about an Indian immigrant Tilo (Tilottama), who comes

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to Oakland in order to help the people of her community. Hence she leaves her homeland and comes to another land to serve and help those, who (like her) belong to the Indian diaspora. The novel is about the diasporic existence of Indians in America, Tilo's customers and about Tilo herself. They all belong to the category of people who have lost their roots. They have left their homelands to which they belong and have moved to a country where they are never completely accepted; hence they always remain outsiders be it in their homeland or the land which they have migrated to. Divakaruni has used magic realism as a tool to express her diasporic sensibility through her novel *The Mistress of Spices*. Tilo, the mistress of spices uses the hidden powers of spices to heal the emotional and psychic wounds of those of her customers who belong to her community. It is peculiar to Divakaruni's homeland India to use spices for various purposes such as healing wounds or enhancing beauty or to use them as antiseptic etc. Divakaruni's use of spices for the purpose of magic which heals represents the author's longings for her Indian past, and a piece of her Indian self within her in the form of nostalgia shapes the novel. The aroma of spices is spread all over the novel giving it a peculiar Indian touch. Her diasporic sensibility prepares an Indian dish garnished with Indian spices in a western plate in the form of this novel. Be it the pujas, festivals, kitchen, cooking, marriage or other ceremonies; strong aroma of spices and vibrant colours is the most powerful experience of senses in the country Divakaruni belongs to. This has been successfully transmitted to the novel.

Tilo was taken away from her parents by pirates whom unknowingly she had invoked. Her desire to see pirates merely to get a way out of the boredom and rejection in her own home manifests them in reality and she is unable to undo this powerful unintended magic, just as the migration (be it out of necessity as in gunnysack diaspora or the willing rucksack diaspora) leads to an irreversible painful diasporic existence. Either out of necessity or because of their good position or job which doesn't allow them to get back to the homeland their painful existence continues, so does the process of recreating their identity in order to achieve a stable and complete identity. This is what happens with Tilo too ever since her parents are killed and she is taken away, she changes forms and names in order to seek completion of identity. She acquired the knowledge about the magic of spices so that she could identify herself with them. For this she has to leave behind her ability to speak with the snakes. This is symbolic of diasporic movement leaving behind her home in order to acquire a new identity in a new land. One identity is left behind and another is taken up. Also one body (her real one) is left behind and a new body (an old aged one) is taken up. This is her physical embodiment of diasporic existence. She is also nostalgic of the snakes and of her life in which she interacted with them which is a feature of diasporic existence and which makes her a character experiencing diasporic existence (instead of an embodiment of diasporic

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existence). Hence both as a character and as a symbol she represents diaspora. Her physical self is displaced from her parent's place to the pirate's ship to the lonely island where she learns the magic of spices and from there to Oakland, US. Her physical form is changed from her real body to an old aged one to an extremely beautiful and young body and then back to her real body. Her name changed from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati, Tilottama and finally Maya. And with all these changes her identity changed. She keeps changing her identities (her name, age, profession, body) along with the changing people and places around her. Hers appears to be a conflicting self of Nayan Tara the child (innocence), Bhagyavati the queen of pirates (cruelty), Tilottama the mistress of spices (selfless service), Maya (her desiring and loving self). With changing identities she takes up different roles each contradicting the other. The final choice of name i.e. Maya literally means illusion. Her changing selves bring out the diasporic sensibility of their creator, Divakaruni. Even the movement of plot represents Tilo's nostalgia in the US. Her past life is represented through analepsis in between the narrative which is in present tense. Tilo also represents the alienation of new generation. She being the mistress of spices had to follow certain rules. She could not see her reflection in a mirror, she was not supposed to use her powers for herself, she was never to leave the store and go out, she was not even required to serve those who were not from her community, and she could not touch another person's skin, i.e. she could not have a relationship with anyone but the spices. She was not even to feel any intense emotion for anyone (in motherly, sisterly, friendly or any other way). Her compassion for others had to be free from personal attachment. She was there merely to serve as if she did not exist, not even for the customers while speaking to them. Only they did for whom she was living her life. Even her own body had left her or was left behind in her homeland. She got an old withering body instead. But her eyes were the same throughout. They never changed, nor did the desires, dreams, visions, memories etc which they witnessed. Though the desires existed in the form of a spark but she was not even supposed to desire. Raven's presence changed this spark of desire into a fire. Hence the desire for assimilation and the feeling of alienation both existed within her. Also Tilo (with her rules and her withered body) was physical embodiment of alienation and her eyes a symbolic embodiment of desire for assimilation. In fact her vary desires curbed by her identity as a mistress of spices were responsible for her identity as a mistress of spices. The novel talks about desires and longings of the customers that visit the mistress as well as the desires of the mistress herself. It was Tilo's desires that had set her in search of her identity and of self fulfilment. From self imposed or forced exile of colonial India to a willing immigration of modern times, the desire to improve one's starving condition in the past and the desire for a better life in present is one of the most important controlling factors responsible for the emergence of Indian diaspora. The novel is weaved around the desires of

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Tilo and her customers. The desires withhold all irrespective of their national or cultural backgrounds but the first mother had warned Tilo of the national boundaries. Tilo was to serve only her own people, this rule for the mistress reflects at the aggressiveness that lies in the national boundaries. Haroun had been beaten badly merely because he had asked for taxi fare but the real cause was his Indian identity. The aggressiveness is apparent in Haroun's episode. The three basic features of diaspora i.e. nostalgia, the problem of assimilation and alienation influenced not only the mistress of spices but also her customers in different ways Haroun, for example, was beaten because he was not accepted in this land, he suffered from the problem of assimilation. Divakaruni's diasporic sensibility creates a wide range of characters and carefully handles their diasporic experience. It is Divakaruni's diasporic sensibility which shapes Tilo's quest for identity and hence her adventurous journey of life. For it was Tilo's desire, and 'the emptiness' within her which she wished to fill, that brought pirates in her village. Even when in her homeland, the crisis of identity and 'the emptiness' is probably a result of the author's diasporic sensibility:

I would turn my face into my pillow to escape the emptiness opening like a black hand inside my chest. I would focus my attention on my discontent until it glittered sharp as a hook, and then I would cast it out over the ocean in search of my pirates (Divakaruni 18).

Tilo comes to America in order to give selfless service to people and as a mistress of spices she seems to have no desires, no conditions merely a will to help others. But this unconditional service has a condition that it provides her with self fulfilment and with an identity. Her life's journey is a search of her 'self' which is scattered in the different and conflicting roles played by her through the course of the novel. It is only a means to identify herself with the spices that she serves people. Only Raven's arrival and her desire to have him make her realize the incompleteness of the fragment of a life she was leading. There is the desire for assimilation in her calling him "my American" (72), and her alienation is apparent,

It is a surprise. I did not know that Mistresses could feel so lonely. American I too am looking. I thought all my looking was done when I found the spices but then I saw you and now I no longer know (71).

Apparently she was looking for her 'self' in the different roles she had taken during the course of the novel. Her desires, dissatisfaction and her fragmented identity in the process of seeking completion keep changing names and forms. As a mistress of spices she serves only her community which means she serves the immigrants like her and thereby pieces together a fragment of her identity. At the climax of the novel too she chooses a role, supposedly the final one and a name, Maya. Her changing identities changing finally to Maya

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(meaning illusion) refers to the element of illusion in her final seemingly stable identity. Even what she says to Raven suggests the same,

It wouldn't work, Raven. Even if we found your special place." I take a deep breath, then say it. "Because there is no earthly paradise. Except what 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 waking in cells. Yes, in the hate in the fear. (336).

In the end she leaves her roots, her spices and her magic rather they leave her. So the hyphenated identity ends up in breaking all ties with which the migrant continues to stick. Only her acceptance of what she has makes her feel complete. In her realisation of the fact that the 'paradise' does not exist Tilo comes terms with her identity, loss of roots and the need of accepting the conflicts within her that are the need of her diasporic experience. According to an explorative study of psychological issues of Indians in diaspora...Indian-Americans are...confronting increases in self-awareness and a deeper sense of identity. Therefore, they are also often able to successfully redefine themselves and forge a new identity out of self reliance and inner strength... (Lamor 8). This is what Divakaruni's Tilo does. She experiences 'self-awareness' and is able to 'redefine' herself. Finally she does have a 'sense of identity' but it is a result of her own ability to come to terms with herself rather than an outside miracle changing her life.

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