

Diasporic Sensibility in *Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee

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Abstract

Diaspora is a sort of displaced and dispossessed community or culture in different cultural setup. Various issues emanate from diaspora as ethnicity, migration, incompatibility and identity crisis etc. In recent times, a gaggle of Indian women writers have left their indelible mark on the sand of Diasporic Literature, some of the distinguished names are: Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Meera Alexander, Jhumpa Lahiri, Geete Mehta, Suneeta Peres de Coasta and Chita Banerjee Divakaruni etc. These writers have enriched Diasporic literature with their invaluable versatile writings by portraying the immigrant experiences. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has cemented a secure place at the Parnassus of South Asian Diasporic literature. Deeply rooted in cultural ethos, Divakaruni's novels weave around myth, magic, reality, cross cultural impact, customs, and identity crisis etc. The novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) presents diasporic sensibility exploring and identifying the various kinds of problems faced by immigrants. The people come from different countries born and brought up in different cultural background and lose sheen in the glamour of pell-mell of western civilisation craving for identity. The paper is a humble attempt to explore the diasporic sensibility and gauge the immigrant experiences felt by the writer and carried through the characters of the novel forward.

Keywords: Diasporic sensibility, Identity Crisis, Myth, Culture, Love, Immigration

Indian women writers have brought laurels to the country by virtue of their florid writing living in foreign land. Many diaspora luminaries have attained and acclaimed world recognition. They employ earnest language to discern their diasporic sensibility. The diasporic writers' narratives hover around their native countries. Diaspora writing has wrested attraction in the postcolonial era. The diaspora writers' favourite themes are- adaptation and acculturation, displacement and dispossession, myth, anxiety, culture, native land, longing, magic realism, identity crisis and resonant language. The diaspora literature offers new paradigm to analyse the cross-cultural impact in alien culture. Some popular women novelists who shine like stars in azure sky of world literature are- Geeta Mehta, Bharati Mukherjee, Monika Ali, Meera Sayal, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Meena Alexander, Bidisha Bandyopadhyaya, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni etc.

These women novelists highlight the problems of immigrants along with their rootlessness and feeling of alienation. Salman Rushdie explains Indian diaspora in an ebullient way ¹:

Writers in my position, Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss; some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge –which gives rise to profound uncertainties that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not action cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (p-131).

Being an immigrant, Chitra Banerjee started off her literary career as a poet. Later, she put her legs in the field of novel writing, and earned acclaim. Her first short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995) brought her into spotlight, and fetched her American Book Award. Her literary output includes novels; *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusion* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) etc. Two of her novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* have entered into films by Paul Berges and Gurinder Chaddha. The major themes incorporated in her novels are: myth, magic, reality, culture, identity crisis and the predicament of Indian immigrants. She enlivens Indian myth, magic, beliefs, traditions, and customs in her novels. She tries to have constant repair with her roots, reconnect her emotionally and physically with new hybrid identity. She pries in her inner consciousness to feel the thrust of centripetal force that exerts on immigrants in both cultures and their struggle to survive and sustain their identity in new foreign soil. Dominic Savio drew light from Jasbir Jain's views enshrined in *The Writers of the Indian Diaspora* to understand the concept of diaspora and identity crisis in new land²:

Since Jain highlights issues like whether a diaspora writer is an ambassador or a refugee, whether his culture gets anchored in the alien soil or dislocated, whether he allows himself to suffer from acute nostalgia or relates optimistically to the new culture. Other problems pondered are: Is the migrated individual an alien/exile/stranger, or the adapted son of the soil? Does he have a home, or is he homeless? (180)

The Mistress of Spices is her maiden novel that catapulted her into stardom overnight. Amy Tan considers novel as "A dazzling tale of misbegotten dreams and desires weaved with poetry and story teller magic"³. The writer has written it weaving well poetry and prose. She interweaves myth, magic and reality inextricably well in the novel. Myth and magic serves her as objective correlative to her to vent her feelings. Tilo, the protagonist of the novel is a mythological and magical figure who runs a grocery store in Oakland, California. She is humane, and solves the problems of the people around her tirelessly. She gives spices as remedy to the customers, especially Indian immigrants, cures their ailments and social aloofness and alienation. She is life granter, hurts' healer, and hope giver. She is mistress of spices gifted with magical powers. She is not a stereotyped Indian fiction's rebellious woman raising voice against patriarchy. She is in the knack of giving remedial healing of the sufferings

of the people residing in her vicinity. Throughout the novel, Tilo is thronged by people who comes to her store to share their immigrant experiences and seeking remedy of their predicaments. Tilo avers⁴:

All those voices, Hindi Oriya Assmese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other like notes from a tanpura, all those voices asking more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where. And so I must listen to the spaces between, must know weigh them in my coral-boned hands (*Mistress of Spices*, 78)

The novel underpins the major issue of hybrid identity in an alien land Tilo, the heroine of the novel hails from a poor Indian family where she was born as a third unwanted girl child. She is torn between her ascribed and achieved status. She is juxtaposed to stark reality of Indian immigrants in United States of India. At the outset, she was christened as Nayantara, a mythological name, a flower that is grown near roads, which means star of the eyes. She was gifted with some magical powers, and solved the problems of the villagers, her name spread far and wide like perfume. Her parents who once neglected her after her birth, began to give respect and recognition to her. Deprived of love in her tumultuous childhood, she searches it outside far away from her home. However, she reaches out to mysterious place, an island of spices and was welcomed by First mother who trained girls to become mistress of spices.

Here she comes under the tutelage of first mother and assumes new name Tillotama. Tillotama is sesame seed which turns into golden brown flower resembling the planet, Venus. Tillotama is also name of beautiful Apsara in the court of God Indra. Tillotama, the apsara was very beautiful and ace dancer, and was warned not to fall for any man. When she violated the rule, she was sent to earth facing fury of human life. Tilo passes the purification ceremony-crossing the Shampai's fire along with other mistress of spices Aparajita and Pia. After getting trained by First mother, she comes to Oakland against the wish of First Mother. The Mother gives her knife as a gift to keep always with her to save her life. Tilo was also given ginger roots by the mother to give strength to her heart and be resolute in her vows. She cures the people of their ailments after opening a store of spices in the Spice Bazaar. The First mother told her to abide by rules being a Mistress of Spices: First, she can exercise her magical powers for others without leaving the store, and second she has not to touch any human physically. But like Tillotama, the Apsara of Indra's court, she breaks the vows and falls in love with a lonely American. D. B. Gavani avers⁵:

Divakaruni is writing the script of woman's rebellion against the pressure to suppress their desire and their bodies. The order of Mistress clearly replicates patriarchal struggled and Tilo must be to break free for them. She struggles with her own passions as she builds emotional relationship with native American man., whom she calls, Raven. She transforms herself into woman, feeling guilty about herself indulge, but decides to brave the retribution that she would have to face (80).

Tilo swings on different hammocks and wallows on different turfs to search for identity. She transforms herself from Nayan Tara, queen of pirates to Maya, to fulfil her emotional craving for love and belongingness. The physicality is the expression of identity, both in reality

and fantasy. The immigrants feel alienated as they differ in posture and ethnicity from their Americans brethren. The novel shows the effects of physicality on minds and body of the immigrants. The novel pinpoints the problem of identity crisis throughout the novel. She violates the rules in order to insatiate her urge for identity. Tilo loves Raven at the cost of the anger of the spices and losing the control over them. She becomes the mouthpiece of the modern migrants who want to fulfil their inner desire.

Tilo runs the spice store in and recreates a small India around her and all the immigrants come to her to share their problems, pain, and predicament and get remedy of their ailment finding her store their other home. Her store serves them an oasis in a cultural desert. Tilo is generous and genial spirit who creates a hallowed halo hovering around Indian immigrants. She tries her best to assuage pain of immigrants either by procuring spices to them or to give balm to their trauma. Jagjit, a Sikh boy from Punjab often visits her store with his mother. He is victim of racial slur in the school, and booed for not been to speak English fluently: “Talk English son of bitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole (*The Mistress of Spices*, 39)”. But till the end of the novel, he is a different boy transforming into a responsible lad by her emotional and remedial treatment. The spice store of Tilo becomes a centre of monolithic national identity and dignity. Jagjit who is timid boy in the beginning becomes a hooligan later. The migrants who go to America for financial affluence prosper but some don’t make good of it., they lose their children drowned in the new culture’s glamour. Sunaina Mitra and Rajni observe identity crisis in the introduction to *An Anthology of by South Asians in North America*⁶:

For first generation South Asian issues of belonging become increasingly complicated the longer they stay in America, and even more profoundly. Boundaries between ethnicities, class, gender, and religion dissolve and re-emerge, as second-generation South Asians... of contested identities and contested forms of belonging (or not belonging) in North America (303).

Diasporic sensibility of the writer permeates through the galaxy of immigrant characters who throng around mistress of spices’ spice store in Oakland. The spice store introduces myriad of people hailing from different parts of the country India showing diversity craving for identity comprising rich, middle and lower class- rich people’s affectation showed in Anant Soni, Dr. Lalchandani and wife, Prameela Vijn, and Rajesh etc; middle class bougainvillea girls, Ramu, Geeta, Mohan, Daksha, Kwesi etc lost in their predicaments; Haroun, Jagjit, Lalita etc the working class people looking forlorn and engrossed in their incompatibility to sustain in the new culture with their native identity etc. All the immigrants look desperate to vent their problems, feelings and cater their needs. The immigrants’ incapability to cope with the new environment, new culture, new plurality, and to sustain their sense of identity is manifested by the writer very graphically. Mark the intensity of the following lines of Tilo’s observation about the rich women immigrants: “Rich woman Thank you for reminding me. Beneath the shiniest armour, gold-plated or diamond, the beat of the vulnerable flesh (*The Mistress of Spices*, 77)

The Indian immigrants find it hard to acculturate and assimilate in the new culture. Harroun who hails from Kashmir, comes to America for better future than running shikaras for

tourists there but is torn between his loyalty to native land and adaptability to new atmosphere. He finds a good ally in a Kashmiri immigrant businessman who helps him to buy a cab. A compassionate patriot Tilo breaks the jinx to draw him out of difficulty and faces punishment from First mother. Lalita, a young beautiful wife of a watchman has dream to run a tailor shop in new found country, she sews new clothes for her upcoming baby and is beaten bad and blue by her husband when she requests him to see the gynaecologist for check-up. This request converts in fight and he beats her mercilessly and rapes her to show his manliness. See Lalita's agony for being mistreated by her husband that she shares with the mistress of spices:

It is not right that a woman should say such things about her man: all day at home is so lonely, the silence like quick sand sucking at her wrists and ankles. tears she cannot stop, disobedient tears like spilled pomegranate seeds, and Ahuja shouting when he returns home to her swollen eyes (*The Mistress of Spices*, 15).

Tilo serves as balm to Indian immigrants engrossed in their predicaments and turmoil and striving for identity and liberty. Geeta, a young woman has given enough freedom by her parents but they are reluctant to accept her decision to marry Juan a foreigner. She is part of a paradigmatic diasporic family where we see a conflict between two generations-the old and the new.. The writer has shown the relations between generations very complex in the maze of new era where we have human and civil rights. Geeta's grandfather is orthodox and doesn't approve of such alliance. Tilo tries hard to unite Geeta with parents and her grand father. Tilo transgresses many peripheries to help other out. She is a young woman full of verve and warmth and builds a passionate emotional attachment with native American, Raven. Tilo knows that she is jeopardising her life by swinging on hammock of love with Raven. The novel shows women's assertion of her rights to insatiate their biological urge. She wants her voice to be heard, desires to quenched, and search of identity be fulfilled. The novel is divided into fifteen chapters and each chapter unravels a vignette of cross-cultural colour. Tilo adopts a new name Maya in the end of the novel showing writer's diasporic sensibility and thus to empower woman to articulate her right of having desire, no matter, it be in in alien land. See the following lines that validate women's craving for emotional gratification:

I always craved the power of perfection and find now that human frailty has its own power too. I kiss it and hear the breath sharp in his throat. Then his lips everywhere, his tongue, teasing, drawing me out of myself. I Tilo never thought I would learn the ways of pleasure so surprising fast, pleasure that flows over the body like warm honey, fingertips, toes, each pore (*The Mistress of Spices*, 288).

Thus, we see that the novel *Mistress of Spices* mirrors myriad complexities underlying across the domain constructed by Indian immigrants to establish an identity in new culture. However, novel gives a peep in diasporic sensibilities. She has also given the cyclorama of multiculturalism by delineating characters like Geeta, Lalita, Jagjit, and Haroun and giving voice to their striving for identity. The language of the text is very crisp and chiselled, and a powerful tool to measure the contours of Indian immigrants residing in America. Through her kaleidoscopic vision, she gives the snapshots of Indian immigrants' vying for identity, stability,

liberty and dignity in new world. She presents the feeling of alienation and marginalisation of immigrants searching a new identity and triumphing the rootlessness. She weaves the theme of myth, magic and romance revolving around the axis of magic realism, and successfully showcasing the broad spectrum of life experiences of migrants. Thus, we can say that Chitra Banerjee vehemently, vigorously and vociferously vents out her feel of agony and angst of immigrants who have come to America their dream land. The novel is testament of writer's diasporic sensibility, and serves as window to see different perspectives on the role of class, culture, gender and sexuality shaping the cultural psychology of Indian immigrants. Divakaruni examines the cultural impact, propounds new outlook to explore different shades in diasporic rainbow. We sign off with the words of Olivia M. Espin on immigrants and their psychology⁷:

As migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioural boundaries. Becoming a member of a new society stretches the boundaries of what is possible. One's life and roles change. With them, identities change as well. Most immigrants and refugees crossing geographical borders, rarely anticipate the emotional and behavioural boundaries they will confront (241).

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