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Diaspora- Redefined as in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract:

Through this paper, my attempt is to establish *The Mistress of Spices* as an important novel depicting the various complexities inherent in Indian immigrants to establish cultural identity in America and not that enough, suggesting possible solution too. The theme analysis of the paper includes inner conflict of duty versus love in Tilo – the protagonist's life, issues relating to the survival of the immigrant Indians in America, and their search for identity. The novel from the voice of Tilo and the other characters traces the nuances of Indian heritage as well their new found way of lives in an alien country where they struggle to survive for a better life: equally at home and at the same time homeless. They underscore this unique situation, navigate the cultural borders and hence, there exists a feasibility of hybrid identity or global identity – an amalgam of both cultures fabricating and redefining one's identity and thus, a positive scope for livelihood in a foreign land is manifested. While other diaspora authors consciously examine the replica of cultural shock and dilemma they find overseas, it is Divakaruni who gives a decisive outlook that redefines diaspora in a different shade of light.

Keywords: Diaspora, The Mistress of Spices, Indian immigrants, hybrid identity, cultures.

Introduction:

The texts that were produced during the time following India's independence clearly fall under the broad umbrella of post colonial literary study. However, within that time period, people also began to move out of India and establish themselves in other nations, primarily due to the genesis of Globalization. One is not sure, whether the world has become small like a village or people of this global world have started shrinking. Many a things have changed and Literature, which is no less than the reflection of the society, has succeeded to bring out this dilemmatic diasporic sensibility of global citizen. In light of the massive migration of Indians, the literature

being produced is also worthy of considering within the light of specifically postcolonial immigrant or diasporic Indian literature. There are innumerable writers writing about their own people and culture being on the foreign land. Many of the immigrants during that time were women, and some were able to read and write in English, and thereby started to contribute their narratives. As the diaspora has grown, so has the production of diasporic women's literature, including esteemed authors such as Anita Desai, Baharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

While many contemporary women writing in South Asia "write with a sense of attempting to make their individual voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations, diasporic women's writing has different characteristics" (Lau 252). Women of diaspora, according to Lau, instead "almost always, without exception, testify to a sense of dual or multiple identities" (N.p., n.d. Web.). That negotiation of identity issues within the literature qualifies the writing of women of diaspora as worthy of specific literary critique. It is through their stories that their unique experiences, their perspective, and their identity struggles can often be witnessed. Authors such as Divakaruni who focus on the issues of diaspora find themselves in a unique spot, both personally and within their text, which Lau asserts: "Although all the debut novels and short stories have located their plots and characters in South Asia, Divakaruni... did not choose to do so" and instead focused on "writing of the diasporic experience for South Asians in USA"(241). Much of Divakaruni's works deal with the immigrant experience, an important theme in the mosaic of American society.

About the Author:

Being an immigrant herself, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is fairly prolific as a poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist. She is born on 1957 in Calcutta, India. She has gained wide national and international audiences from her first publication, *The Reason of Nasturtiums* (1990) and *Black Candle* (1991). She has written several poetry collections, critical essays and several novels which include *The Mistress Of Spices*(1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *Neela: Victory Song* (2002), and *Queen of Dreams* (2004). She was honored with awards that include PEN Josephine Miles Award, Bay Area Book Reviews Award and The American Book Award.

She is also the one who belongs to the postcolonial era constantly plunging around that intangible moment in which individuals accept their histories, move away from their native place, try to fix their roots in a strange locality and free themselves from the rhetorical burden of circumstance they encounter in their life (Rathiga, 2015). As an Indian immigrant to the United States of America, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tries to break free from stereotypes and uses her past experiences and the desire to communicate the plight of Indian women in America, as the driving force behind her writing. Her writings constitute an attempt to re-connect her, emotionally and physically to her immigrant status. She has explored the force of tradition of her native country as well as the challenges faced by the immigrants in her adopted country.

Divakaruni turns to her inner consciousness to develop a new narrative which highlights not only the oppressive force exerted over women in both their native and non-native cultures, but how transposed traditions survive and transmute on foreign soil. Divakaruni has once said, “I am a listener, a facilitator, a connector of people” (*qtd.* in Miri 83).

Analysis of the Theme Undertaken:

The Mistress of Spices ventures into an unfathomable world of magic and daily experiences of the characters. It is cloaked in fantasy and the prologue with its strong poetic overtone convinces us that this is literature of fantasy. The fantasy and the reality in the novel complement each other rather than separating them. However, a strong undercurrent of realism runs at the very beginning of the novel and becomes manifested later on. The novel does not just deal with the mystic nature of Tilo, but it goes far 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 new found 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. 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.

One can see the transformation of Tilo from the beginning of the novel and it continues till the end. The filial love of a daughter is not received by Nayan Tara. She suffers from not being accepted and loved by her biological parents. Her parent's reaction contrasts with the meaning of her first name, “Star of the eye”, yet, Nayan Tara is scared by her family and village because of her supernatural powers to see the future. Nayan Tara is forced to look for other persons who would bring her love. She happens to meet the Old Woman whom she calls the First Mother. The First mother promises her a sense of security and love. Nayan Tara changes into Tilo. Kafka tracks the development of Tilo and observes that when the young Tilo (then named Bhagyavati) meets with the sea serpents, they do not want her to leave them: “They predict that if she does not remain with them, everything she possesses – the ability to see, to speak, her name, even her identity will be lost”(158).

Due to her diverse experience and transnational existence, Tilo is “chameleon like, and she keeps changing throughout the novel, making clear how complex is the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land”(Mitra). She has been changing her name from Nayan Tara as a good daughter, then to Bhagyavati during her stay with the pirates, then to Tilo, and finally Maya, when she finds her love. The name Maya is interesting to note since it means illusion. One can pause and ask whether Maya is real or another illusion created by the author to enhance the magical suspense in the novel or the new found identity of Tilo. The name

is noteworthy since the novel has magic element and the name "Maya" substantiates the theme.

The physical body is the primary assertion of identity, both in appearance and action. A person is usually judged first and foremost on what they look like – tall, short, thin, fat, light-skinned, and dark-skinned. For immigrants, the experience of physical difference can be multiplied as they often have different ethnic features that differ from many of their American counterparts. In each instance in *The Mistress of Spices* where the body is involved, Divakaruni skillfully employs horrific effects of diaspora on the physical condition of the immigrant. Since the body is established as a significant element of identity, such representations carry great strength so as the transformation of Tilo is also crucial. Such exploration of identity persists throughout the novel.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* also tries to find answer regarding love, duty, cultured woman, identity and displacement. A close reading of the novel unfolds various interpretations. It addresses far more important issues of identity crisis in today's world like the transformation of old to new world and the fragmentation of one's identity. The novel deals deeper issue of woman in defining their unique space in contemporary world. After the complication of the training that Tilo underwent to be the mistress of spices, she has to go through the Sampath fire and choose the country she wants to go. There are certain codes of rules to be followed as the mistress which Tilo ultimately breaks during the course of her transformation. For, Tilo breaking the rules are significant in terms of defining one's identity. Homi Bhaba asserts that "the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting"(44). She tries to adjust with the situation given to her and she does what is best for the situation and she never runs away from it. She always faces it with determination and Tilo never rejects the supernatural element of the spices. Tilo's acceptance of Raven, the Native American, despite the anger of the spices implies disagreement with the enclosed world which is filled by exclusion and static laws. Tilo is the voice of today's generation exploring one's inner desire and trying to break the boundary that divides the world into different segments.

Many immigrants moving to the United States from South Asian countries have some experience speaking English and are educated in the language. However, sometimes they don't have a background in the language. Also, immigrants often come from areas where multiple languages are spoken simultaneously and English is added as yet another element of their multilingual knowledge base. For instance, in *The Spice Bazaar*, where Tilo sells the spices covers the whole Indian community of Oakland, one sees myriad faces belonging to different sections of the society and from various parts of India as well as other minorities like – the bougainvillea girls, the rich men's wife, the Mohans, Haroun, Jagjit, Ahuja's wife, Geeta's grandfather and Kwis. As Divakaruni's immigrant characters struggle, they try to communicate experiences, feelings, concerns, needs, etc. Each face tells one unique story

contributing to larger story of survival. In that process, language becomes yet another issue of displaced identity. Difficulties with language expression combined with a multitude of language barriers often create challenges, prevent effective articulation, and block healthy interpersonal interaction within the diasporic community. As a result of language barriers, elements of adjustment to America can be challenging for immigrants on multiple levels. Saturdays, for example, are described as the busiest days for Tilo's shop, during which she hears everyone speaking together: "All these voices, Hindi Oriya Assamese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other..." (Divakaruni 81). The struggles that immigrants experience with words further illustrate the concept of their existence in a world of multiplicity and fragmentation. In view of the above mentioned fact, "language forms an important aspect in the formation of ethnic identity in the diaspora".

The Indian living in America have to assimilate themselves with the new environment in order to survive. Tilo, the central figure of all these characters tries her best to give them solace until she is caught in her own desire. Tilo tries to bridge the gap between two different cultures and she is the only one to help the immigrant to come in term with their lives and act as a synthesizer in the new environment. Multiple other immigrant characters also come into contact with Tilo and there are varying levels of adjustment to life in America. Sarah Johnson writes that Divakaruni's "rich array of characters includes Indian Americans who... are in transition and struggling for a sense of their true identity" (20). Some, like the bougainvillea girls are the embodiment of American youth but inside young Indian bodies who have combined 'silky salwaars' and 'Calvin Klein jeans' (Divakaruni 52).

Tilo's spiritual relation with the spices is soon replaced to Raven, the Native American. Tilo tries to change herself for the man she loves. As a mistress, she is forbidden to love herself and to look attractive in order not to be loved by someone. After meeting with Raven, she goes beyond the forbidden territory and she turns to be a beautiful woman. The chapter, "Makaradwaj", elaborately deals with Tilo beautifying herself. She is stricken by her own beauty and thus feels a new kind of fascination. Here, Lacan's mirror-stage is also applicable to Divakaruni's text specifically, as the image of a mirror is explored repeatedly. Tilo is forbidden to see herself in a mirror, and even avoids her image in the reflection of the windows of the store at the beginning of the novel. However, as she continues to grow and change, she cannot control her desire to look in the mirror. She even purchases one and there is constant interaction and/or resistance of interaction with the mirror; she is at once excited about the potential in seeing herself, and also nervous about the consequences. Since it has been asserted that the mirror stage is a moment of recognition of self, Tilo's engagement with the mirror is of vital importance to the development of her character. She has great expectations of interactions with the mirror: "Mirror, forbidden glass that I hope will tell me the secret of myself" (Divakaruni 151). Tilo not only wants to recognize herself in the mirror, but also longs for that Lacanian moment of identification in which she is able to identify herself as independent, autonomous, and self-

realized. Divakaruni skillfully employs the mirror as a way of pointing out yet again the identity issues caused by the immigrant experience.

The conflict between love and duty acts as a catalyst in the novel. Tilo as a mistress is not free to fall in love. She is caught between the two worlds; duty as a mistress and her personal needs as a human being. The strong emotion of love compels her to act against her duty at various levels. Tilo has done her last bit of breaking – she has broken away from all expectations, rules, desires of others and finally in her moment of resolution found the ability to voice her own needs, and a willingness to build life in her own identity formation – almost as though she is born into a new identity. Making love with Raven brings Tilo, a symbolic change making her more human rather than supernatural and it gives a sense of harmony with the outside world.

The act of naming has been so important throughout Tilo's life, but this time she tells Raven she wants a name that “spans both my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now”(Divakaruni 337). When he suggests Maya, she readily accepts it. Maya represents the illusionary power of the world. According to Christina Bacchilega, “Maya is a name that ‘dissolves boundaries’(188). Ultimately, Maya – who was Nayan Tara and Tilottama and a Mistress of Spices – reaches a point of resolution as a self-realized woman. “Like many other immigrants, Tilo's identity is composed by an Indian part and an American part; it is, in other words, a ‘transnational hybridized identity’(6).

Conclusion:

Thus, *The Mistress of Spices* presents a heterogeneous picture of the Indian and the American culture. This blending of culture between Indian culture and American culture leads to a new amalgamated culture which enriches and diversifies the extended culture in various parts of the world. The immigrant has particular perception of their own native country in the new environment. The acute problems of the characters are the issues of survival and identity and it becomes crucial to explore how characters maneuver their lives and identity struggles. It is clear that “as migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioral boundaries.... One's life and roles change. With them, identities change as well”(Espín, “Gender” 241). According to an explorative study of psychological issues of Indians in diaspora, it becomes evident that while Indian-Americans are challenged in extreme ways they are simultaneously 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. When they move away from the roots, it may be possible to have new branches growing around and gradually converting themselves into roots supporting the body of the tree as banyan tree. Although, such experiences are stressful, they also provide opportunities for creating a new ‘global identity’ or ‘hybrid identity’. The novel is a beautiful piece of art presented in as a telescopic insight into the lives of immigrants in America. By blending myth, fantasy and

realism, Divakaruni is able to break stereotype of defining one's identity only from the socio and political level.

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