

## Quest for Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's

### *The Mistress of Spices*

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Perspectives that emerge from at least two cultures, identities, and in some cases, language forge the recent literature of emigration and exile. The “themes in migrant literature, however, vary depending not only on country of origin but also on the pattern of migration itself” (Velmani 174). The focus of migrant literature is often directed at the act of migration to another land, issues of rootlessness and racism, nostalgia and longing. For the immigrants, the process of fitting into their new home country involves the loosening of ties with the country of their origin, a strong sense of dislocation within the family where traditional gender roles are newly defined under the pressure of the surrounding society in the newly acquired community. They undergo the plights of identity crisis, cultural dilemmas and displacement.

One of the most remarkable writers of the Indian diaspora is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The immigrant sensibility is one of the major themes of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Having settled in the United States, she experienced firsthand difference between Indian culture and the culture in the U.S.A. She focuses on the stories of Indians who migrate from their motherland to the United States for varied reasons such as career, education, business and so on. Her maiden novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, reflects the hopes, aspiration and frustration of the immigrants in United States. Her writing records the process of assimilation in a unique fashion as Vanjulavalli remarks: “When people migrate from one country to another, many changes occur in their lives. One of the significant changes is assimilation, which happens first as soon as they step into the western or foreign country. Immigrants transform themselves in many aspects” (87).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has poured out her immigrant experience in her fictions which deals with assimilation that takes place in different situations. For instance, Banerjee refers to changes in food habits. It must be one of the most notable changes that an expatriate

feels in her ‘self’. Most of her characters have adopted American food habits. Many Indian characters in her fiction are portrayed as persons eating American food items such as pizza, spring rolls, eggplant in black bean sauce, sweet and sour shrimp, pork chow almond sauce, chocolate chip, blue berry. Divakaruni has pictured the characters as they prepare some American food items at their home. But it may be surprising for other Indians whose food habits is entirely different, but in fact, it is true that many immigrants have given up their customary food habits. The second important changes immigrants have to experience are the difference in the clothes they have to wear in their adopted country.

Dress becomes another sign system that denotes the adjustment made by the immigrant people. While in India, many people wear many kinds of Indian dress typical of the region in which they live. But as soon as they land in another country they have to give their way of dressing according to that particular country. There is a compulsion to be accepted by the people of the new country.

Divakaruni’s dramatization of feminine mysticism certainly delights many American readers, offering sensibilities exotic to their traditions. Some of her works lend themselves to orientalist reading; for instance, Christine Vogt-William, in her readings of *The Mistress of Spices*, cannot resist the temptation to interpret Tilo’s spice shop in Oakland, California as “a form of purdha conferred or imposed on Tilo” (156).

Chitra Banerjee’s major contribution lies in capturing the continuity of the lives of woman, the South Asian immigrants to the U.S. In the world of Divakaruni, the understanding of men and women are firmly separated and the men often play peripheral roles, only sometimes impinging on the horizon of the women’s lives. In *The Mistress of spices*, Chitra Banerjee has grappled with women’s experience through female language and the intuitive aspects of female intelligence. Tilo, the protagonist forges an identity for herself by exacting the Indian woman’s traditions. Chitra Banerjee concentrates on the immigrants experiences, “a central motif in the mosaic of American society. Her objective is to deconstruct myths and stereotypes. She hopes to dissolve through her writing boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and worlds” (Chadurvedi 56).

The Indian experience in America and the conflict between the traditions of the novelist's homeland and the culture of her adopted country is the focus of her fictional and poetic works. And this has precisely made her an emerging literary celebrity of the present times. The novel, *The Mistress of Spices* follows Tilo, an immigrant from India who runs a spice shop in Oakland California. Tilo provides spices not only for cooking but also for the homesickness and alienation for the Indian immigrants. As Velmani says, "Divakaruni combines the unfamiliar, the female Indian immigrants experience with the familiar urban life in America, blending the two into a magical narrative that relates a gifted young woman's plight as an outsider in southern California as a *Mistress of Spices*" (176). The protagonist is named Nayan Tara, "They named me star of the Eye, but my parents faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child, and this one coloured like mud" (MOS 7).

Tilo's multiple identities, Chameleon like, make clear how complex is the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with a foreign land. She encounters various people who come to her for help and she exerts her magical power on Geeta, Lalita and Ahuja. Tilo is born from the experience of Divakaruni. As Laura Merlin in a Review in *world literature today* states that, "Divakaruni builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American society that lies between the self and the community. Addressing the immigrant experience in particular, she asks how to negotiate between the needs of each under the earth moving stress of desire" (207).

Through Tilo, Divakaruni talks of the boundaries that separate communities and people. Tilo becomes the mistress in a far away island, the female universe outside, and traditional geographic locations and out of the conventional male world. This world, inhabited by birth halves of humanity-male and female is actually a male world. Tilo selects one such male world America to help the battered, marginalized and suppressed woman. Within the male universe, she lives in the store, an isolated female world. Gita Rajan, in reading *The Mistress of Spices*, defines mysticism to be "founded upon interiority, and closely linked with beliefs that God directly affects the outcome of human actions" (217).

Divakaruni ends *The Mistress of Spices* with this protagonist Tilo,s choice of love over her power, thus making a feminist statement about women's agency over their hearts and bodies. Tilo must choose "between the isolated microcosms of the spices, with its strict rules of

obedience which prelude Tilo's own completed freedom that can carve her own identity progressively and reinvent herself" (Vega-Gonzalez 6). Divakaruni's experience gave birth to the main character of the book, Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* moves back and forth between one existence and another; she bridged the purely realistic and mystic, dealing exclusively with the Indian American community inclusive of three other ethnic groups living in the inner city Latinos, African Americans and the Native Americans.

In the novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, the central character Tilo, an immigrant from India is a magical figure who runs a spice shop in Oakland, California and uses spices to help the customers overcome difficulties. She has taken the body in Shampati's fire and has vowed to become a mistress. Tilo is the short form of Tilotamma, she is named after the sun-burnished sesame seed, spice of nourishment. The customers do not know this as they never bother about the name of a person. However, as the old one, the first mother has told, it is not the name that is importance but the store. The first mother has trained her on the Island. She is not at all important; she is no mistress. The store has the inner room with its sacred and secret shelves. When she happens to see the customers, she used to raise questions related to their problems. "Remember." said the old one, the first mother, when she trained many on the island. "You are not important. What is important is the store. And the spices. The store even for those who know nothing of the inner room with its sacred, secret shelves, the store is an excursion into the land of mind-have-been". (MOS 5)

So the customers used to feel shocked and call her a 'Witch Woman' (MOS 6). They kept their caution flee away from her but they came back later to her. When they returned, she took them into the inner room and lit up the candle and chanted. She paid to remove sadness and sufferings as the Old One taught. Tilo left the island exactly for that purpose. She dispensed wisdom and the appropriate spice; coriander for sight, turmeric for wrinkles and fenugreek to make a rejected life desirable.

Tilo's relationship with the mysterious spices is inspiring and enlightening. Tilo did this by having been trained on the island to listen to the wisdom of the spices that whisperd to her each day. Tilo provided spices not only for selling, but also for homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experienced. She was born in a village when she had her birth,

the mid wife cried over her fate and the fortuneteller shook his head sorrowfully at her father. Actually, the pity is that her parents' faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child. She was considered a dowry debt. They fed her milk from a white ass as her mother was suffering from fever. She was lonely and wandering the village unattended.

Ahuja's wife came to Tilo's store. She was young and looked ever younger. She came to the store every week after payday and bought the barest staples: cheap rice, dals, a small bottle of oil and *atta* to make chapattis. She hesitated to buy mango archer or a packet of papads. She had a name, Lalita. It suited to her soft beauty as the name Lalita has three lucid syllables La-li-ta. Tilo wanted to call her Lalita but she preferred to be called as Ahuja's wife. Lalita used to say a few words like 'Namaste', "Is this on sale and where I can find" (MOS14). She knew that her husband was a watchman at the docks and liked a drink or two. She had a rare gift of doing needle works on clothes. She had not been allowed to do her stitching because of her husbands' dominance. She was longing for a child. Tilo decided to give her turmeric wrapped with the words of healing whispered into it.

Throughout the novel Ahuja's wife is never referred to by her real name - she was called only by her husband's name. Lalita's story is the same story of many of the women in India. She did not want to get married. It was only before three days to the wedding, she had seen her husband. He was totally different from the photo shown to her. He came from America. She did not like him but the wedding had been arranged. So, she had to marry an abusive and tyrannical man. She had to be silent with tears, as she could not explain her desire to her parents.

In America too, her husband was watching her. She discarded her dreams of settling up her own tailors' shop in India, followed her husband to an alien land where she had no support, no friends or job. Her life was devoid of any real pleasure. So Tilo gives turmeric to her because Tilo quietly observes her feelings and loneliness. Turmeric may ease Lalita's loneliness. In the end, Tilo got the letter from Lalita through the mail woman. Lalita wrote that she had some organization's help, because her husband was cruel to her and then she was living away from her husband. She also explained the traditional expectations of Indian women in their native culture as, "a daughter, a wife, a good daughter-in-law, a good mother" (MOS3).

Lalita plays her role as a daughter and a wife. But she loses her desire. At last Lalita reveals herself and she decides to manage her life to suit her heart and pursue happiness in her own sweet way. Lalita, like Tilo tried to solve the other problems with the help of spices.

Divakaruni acknowledges not only the different experiences in *The Mistress of Spices* but also goes one step further “by challenging expected gender-based responses, reactions and resolutions in regards to fractured identity issues” (Dhawan 9). In assuming the changes of revealing the plights of such persons, Divakaruni places herself at the forefront of the recent emergence of postcolonial and feminists’ tents to tackle the subjects of female. Oppression both in society, inclusive of minority subgroups and within the home. In this novel Tilo choosing Raven has darker and somber message that women toady however successful, however, educated and emancipated, are still to themselves as well as to the world incomplete without a man. And in that search for the perfect male and for perfect happiness, there is compromise and pain and a self-mutilation of personal identity. That in the words of Jung, “A women seeks completion and completion is imperfect” (Tyabij 26)

Elizabeth Softky points out that for Divakaruni, “Tilo is the quintessential immigrant- she must decide which parts of her heritage she will keep and which parts she will leave behind” (26). As a women Divakaruni successfully projects the urges, dreams and desire of immigrants who refuses to be suffocated by male dominated environment. *The Mistress of Spices* is a realistic novel. Not only is the contemporary urban America palpably rendered at every page, but the characters are much more than stick-figures ciphers pushed away. They fully presented, physically and psychologically, and certain the strength, weakness and quirks all human do.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni presents her own experience through Tilo who faces many troubles I searching for her identity. It spells a message of hope for many people in the future. Thus Tilo’s direct confrontation with the alien culture leads her to discovery of her inner self. The last lines of the novel find Tilo’s resolution becoming whole as she decides it is time to take on a new name. *The Mistress of Spices* is one example in which these ideas can be clearly identified and explored through literary analysis.

The layers of immigrant suffering in *The Mistress of Spices* is evocative, complex and enduring. *The Mistress of Spices* is “men’s violence against women; and white violence against South Asians and other ‘Un-Americans’” (Leenerts 28). As tale after tale of migrant narratives unfold before Tilo, the voices together, confused and frightened, the collective experiences of marginalization assumes urgency. As each character confronts the possible meanings of being an outsider, the complexity of their solutions become more apparent. Raven was brought up by an American Indian mother who totally cut herself and her family of her origins. Raven, the immigrants born and brought up in the United States of America and Tilo, the visible immigrant, are both Indians moving from the separate alignment of east and west towards the precarious balance of being America.

Tilo and Raven share a vision of an earthly paradise a place “high up in the mountains, pine and eucalyptus, damp odour of redwood, bark and cone” (MOS 199). After the earthquakes, they head out in search of this almost mythic primeval space and in a reversal of the customary female role, Tilo refuses. She has learnt to say “No, that word so hard for Indian women” (MOS 81). In this emerging relationship, Raven who learns to leave the dreamlike world of the mountains to embrace a more socially responsible, immediate one. As Tilo examines her physical condition, she finds that she is whole. For the first time in the entire novel, she feels physically like a complete woman, no longer two bodies containing one space.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni by being away from her homeland realized the vulnerability of her identity, which she expresses in many ways through the voice of her protagonists. The immigrant experiences with the alien people open the eyes of the heroines of Chitra Banerjee. The land of opportunity gives them courage and hope. Tilo, after observing the immigrant people who live happily with the imperfect real world, decides to take a human identity. Geetha’s stubbornness in love lures Tilo to think that what she feels is not a wrong one. Lalitha’s immigration gives her courage to come out of home and to stand on her own feet. All these ending do not convey that they dependent on others. But they learn to accept the life of reality. Divakaruni has highlighted the problems faced by the Indian immigrants in America, though born and brought up in America, how vulnerable they are to racial discrimination and this has depicted in her novel *The Mistress of Spices*. The novel, *The Mistress of Spices* explores the



Indian Ethos and issues of immigration encountered by women. What makes it unique and interesting in that it brings to the fore how these women face the challenges and hurdle to and come out victorious.

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