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TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

Dr. Madhav Dattarao Shrimangale
Head, Associate Professor, Department of English, Vasantrao Kale Mahavidyalaya, Dhoki
Tq. Dist. Dharashiv, MS, India

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 1997 novel, The Mistress of Spices, explores the transformation and assimilation of Indian immigrant women within the American diasporic context. The narrative follows the protagonist Tilo, who uses her magical connection to spices in an Oakland grocery store to assist other immigrants facing cultural displacement, racism, and patriarchal oppression. Through characters like Lalita, Geeta, and Hameeda, Divakaruni highlights the "in-betweenness" experienced by women caught between traditional Indian heritage and an alien Western culture. The study emphasizes how these women transition from victims of male-dominated societal structures toward autonomy and independent identities. Tilo's personal journey from a "Mistress of Spices" to Maya signifies a profound shift from a life of magical isolation to one of human love and vulnerability. Ultimately, the novel illustrates the formation of hybrid identities, where childhood memories and American experiences merge into a new Asian American self. Divakaruni thus provides a powerful feminist perspective on the immigrant experience and the enduring resilience of the female spirit.

Keywords

Diaspora, Cultural Assimilation, Hybrid Identity, Patriarchy, Transformation, Indian Immigrant Women,etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific Indian American diasporic writer born in India. 'The Mistress of Spices' is an enchanting novel published in 1997 by Divakaruni. It deals with the theme of the transformation of an Indian immigrant women. Divakaruni highlights on the most of the Indian immigrant women moved to America for the purpose of education, job, marriage etc and assimilated there by transforming themselves in spite of new culture. Tilo is the main protagonist who moved to America and experienced the American life. She has faced so many problems such as language, culture, racism etc. Diasporic writing reveals the interaction of traditional culture with the culture of an adopted alien land and brings about a transformation in the inherited tradition and culture. The predicament of the fate of the females in cross-cultural spaces has been a major component of the literature produced by writers, surviving in the conflicting pulls of 'home' and 'homelessness', passing through the voyage of migration to assimilation. The consistent confrontation in the process of assimilation, stumbling against alien cultural forces with the persisting shadows of native cultural heritage fracture the individual's self-generating only a greater isolation and loneliness. Divakaruni with her consciousness of the dilemma of cultural crisis shares the anguish and suffering of "womanhood" in the order of patriarchy.

In the age of globalization, the writers of Indian Diaspora have set a distinctive trend of fictional perspective. Their writings represent an uncompromising quest for the native cultural heritage with the longing for the assimilation in alien culture and it subsequently prepares a fine

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fabric of human sensitivity and relationship hitherto unknown in the realm of Indian fiction. Divakaruni with the efficacy of her narrative skill captures the crucial moments of life at the crossroad moments-caught between past and present, excitement for the west and the longing for the East, along with the conflict of tradition and modernity.

The twentieth century has been an age of great spiritual stress and strain. It is regarded as the age of alienation. Post- modern age is the age of global exploration for greener postures. Drastic change has taken place in this age. In the twentieth century, particularly in the western countries like Britain, U.S.A. and Canada mass migration has created a vast cultural mixture. Globalization provides the context for these new cultural formations. It can be seen as "the process of gradually intermeshing world economies, politics and cultures into a global system" (Mathur, 86).

Globalization has increased the frequency of contacts between distant cultures. In our everyday lives we take part in global processes and are integrated in global structures. Cultures as the sum of such meaning patterns, can thus not merely be "an ornament of human existence but-the principal basis of its specifity – an essential condition for it" (Mathur, 92).

The Mistress of Spices is a classic diasporic fiction of Divakaruni. It is about Tilo, an Indian immigrant woman who runs a spice shop in Oakland, California and her transformation from Tilo to Maya. She helps to Indian immigrant women in America to solve their problems those who are caught in various problems. In this novel, Divakaruni has portrayed Indian immigrant women and presented their experiences about alien land. The second generation of diaspora also experiences of some cultural displacement, feeling of in-betweenness and hybridity but the main features that mark their identity is cultural assimilation in alien land or home land. Their ethnic identity is shaped by their childhood memories and the youthful identity is formed by their American experience.

Divakaruni has portrayed the Indian immigrant women- Tilo, Lalita, Daksha, Geeta and Hameeda with their experiences in America. These women protagonists represent vivid identities of diasporic life such as marginalization, rebellious, docile, traditional and modern etc. These Indian immigrant women have migrated to America for the purpose of some reasons like education, job, business, marriage etc. Tilo migrated in America for business, Lalita for marriage, Daksha for job as a Nurse, Geeta for education and marriage and Hameeda for marriage so on. They caught between two worlds- the world of America and the world of India. They have to face so many problems in America as Indian Immigrant woman.

Divakaruni conveys that she was totally immersed in Indian culture when she was in India and she never thoughts of women's rights or their problems. But having gone to U.S.A., she could view these problems and Indian culture objectively. She found that double standards prevailed for women both in the East and the West countries. As diasporic women, she has portrayed the sufferings of women in male dominated society. She is the feminist whose voice echoes the protest against the sufferings of women loud and clear. These countries have turned into melting pots causing literary outbursts voicing multiple diasporic experiences and identities.

Indian diasporic writers like Bharati mukherjee, Salman Rashdie, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and many other have played very important role in this changing scenario. Indian novelists are the keen observer of the hostility felt by them in their adopted land which compelled them to search for their roots. The writing living abroad feel alienated from native country culture and become nostalgic for their roots. The immigrants have to adjust or adopt the culture of the adopted land where they meet contempt.

A literature is being written with a woman central attitude challenging patriarchy, which is the most pervasive ideology power. Previously many women writers wrote about woman from a traditional point of view popular in patriarchy, not from a feminine angle which demands equal

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rights and status for women as men. They imitated male authors who had marginalized the woman either on this side as a mother, goddess or on the other side as vamp, temptress, seductress etc. women were presented in these stereotypes and not regarded as human beings or autonomous individual. What Simone de Beauvoir remarks is true that in the male dominated culture "humanity is male and man defines woman not in itself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (De Beauvoir, XVIII).

In this novel, Divakaruni portrays Tilo as an Indian immigrant woman who has to struggle from her birth in her entire life. Though she has magical powers, she has not freedom that she can't touch to men. At the end of this novel Tilo falls in love with in Raven and her powers destroys. Tilo is the interpreter of this novel. She writes about the Indian immigrant women who are caught in various problems in America. Tilo has many names as Tilo, Tilottama, Nayan Tara, Bhagyawati, Maya etc. At the beginning of this novel, Tilo calls herself as a mistress of spices and suggests as, "I am mistress of spices. I can work the others too" (Divakaruni, TMS, 28).

It states us that Tilo has magical powers and can help her customers for solving their problems by using it. This is an autobiographical novel. Divakaruni starts helpline for Indian immigrant people in America to help them. Tilo considers herself as "I Tilo architect of the immigrant dream" (Divakaruni, TMS, 28).

Tilo is bothered about love of Geeta for Juan Cordero, a Chicano which creates friction in their family. Tilo gives confidence to Lalita who leads an unhappy marital life with her husband Ahuja. Tilo supports to Geeta, Lalita and Jagjit. The protagonist Raven and Tilo have fallen in love with each other. Raven confides of his mysterious background and of his dream about an earthly paradise. When Raven listened of Tilo, he begins to see her along with him in the earthly paradise and asks whether they could find the earthly paradise together. Tilo takes Makaradwaj, king of spices and asks them to make her beautiful fir at night with Raven. Tilo feels that after fulfilling the desire of Raven, she could belong to spices forever. Tilo gives the lotus root sachet to tie around the neck of Hameeda on the night of her wedding with Haroun for passionate loving, instead of redchilli. "Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies" (Mittapalli, 101).

Divakaruni has explored the typical immigrant experience showing the mirror of Indian women wriggling out of stereotypes in American urban landscapes through fictions. Her novel centers on the lives of immigrant women as women in love, women in difficulties, women in relationships etc.

In America, Tilo meets many protagonists who have different problems in their life. She tries to solve their problems with the help of the power of the spices. Having compared the women to men, we come to know that women face more problems than men. For men to earn is the main problem whereas for a woman it starts when she is formed in her mother's womb. Parents abort their child when they come to know it is a girl baby. This is true of not only for ordinary woman but also for Tilo, who has the power of magic. Tilo suffers in her life after meeting Raven. In this novel, there are many women protagonists such as Lalita who gets married to Ahuja, an old man. She realizes this only by showing his photo which was taken years back. She was not interested in getting married. She was happy with her sewing. She agrees to marry for the sake of her parents.

Tilo is a young Indian immigrant woman in America. She emigrate United States and runs Indian Grocery store in the distressed part of Oakland, California and falls in love with Raven who is a handsome American native and builds a life of love with him. William Henry Hudson in his book An Introduction to the study of Literature in the First chapter, some ways of studying literature defines that, "Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have

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experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us" (Henry, 10).

Divakaruni has read classical texts of Indian culture and she was surprised to find few portrayals friendships among women. Further, she noticed that a traditional Hindu woman dependent upon a man throughout her life. As a child she depends upon her father, after her marriage, she depends upon her husband and when she became old she depends upon her son. In this novel, Divakaruni portrays that women break the barriers of worn out traditional values and live independent lives. Laura Marlin in a review of The Mistress of Spices in the World Literature Today rightly points out that, "In this exuberant first novel, the award winning writer Divakaruni builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity 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" (Merlin, 207).

Divakaruni has focused on the mentality of the Indian parents when a daughter is born to them. The protagonist Tilo was born in an Indian village. Her parents were not happy. Tilo describes her parent's psychology after her birth, "They named me Nayan Tara, star of the Eye, but my parents' faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child, and this one coloured me like mud" (Divakaruni, 7).

In this novel, Nayan Tara, a little girl was born to her parents as the second daughter who discovers her hidden psychic powers as she grows up in India. She has a little aware that she one day will be the Mistress of Spices. As Nayan Tara, she meets the first mother and her team of little girls- Mistress of spice in the making. Divakaruni has focused on the Indian immigrant life in America and her problems. Here, in this novel in due course, armed with the sensivities that make a good Mistress of spice. Nayan Tara is launched in the Avatara of Tilo (short for Tilotamma meaning sesame, a spice known for its nourishment and energizing qualities. She walks out of the comfort of the First mother's arms into Oakland in California where she is typically the Indian woman trying to find her feet in the United States, an alien land. She runs a spice shop where spices of every kind are available and Tilo loves them administers them and is true to them. Tilo is their Mistres. She is completely owned by the spices and so utterly in love with them that her entire life centers on the spices who are unrelenting loves. She loves them absolutely, they love her conditionall. Tilo cannot love another person, not even herself, the spices are whimsical and will not tolerate infidelity. They will ruin her and they are jealous lovers. The spices are sensitive to her. As she says, "when I hold it in my hands, the spice speaks to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the World" (Divakaruni, 7).

Conclusion:

Divakruni's 'The Mistress of Spices' presents transformation of Indian immigrant women in America. The second generation of diaspora also experiences of some cultural displacement, feeling of in-betweenness and hybridity but the main features that mark their identity is cultural assimilation in alien land or home land. Their ethnic identity is shaped by their childhood memories and the youthful identity is formed by their American experience. Thus, a hybrid identity is acquired by them. they wish to be recognized as Asian American rather than Indian diasporic.

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