

**OBSERVATION OF DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S THE MISTRESS OF SPICES**

Prof. Vikas Sharma¹

Research Supervisor

D. Lit

Dept. of English

C.C.S University Campus, Meerut

KM. Anjali²

Research Scholar

Dept. of English,

C.C.S University Campus, Meerut

Abstract:

The experience living in diaspora has provided a ground or a base to recent post colonial literature, criticism and theory. There are various writers like Hanif Kureishi, Amitav Ghosh, Bharti Mukerjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and others who are dealing immigrant issues and problems in their works. In recent years, the works of immigrant writers who have settled in U.S have become the subject of much critical interest. These writers deal with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity of Indian immigrant. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of such writers of diasporic literature. She deals with these issues in her writings. Her characters are caught between two worlds east and west and they try to make a balance between two cultures for living peaceful life in America that is the land of dreams for them. Divakaruni makes an appeal of 'togetherness' through her writings. The aim of present paper is to reveal diasporic experiences of immigrants through her well-known work 'The Mistress of Spices'.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity Crisis, Indian Immigrants, Togetherness, Stereotype, Cultures.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most famous authors of diasporic literature. She was born in Calcutta, India. She is a well known poet, novelist, essayist and short story writer. Her works have been translated into many languages due to their popularity and fame. She is well known for her best novels, which include The Mistress Of Spices (1997) Sister Of

My Heart (1997) Oliander Girl, Queen Of Dreams (2004). She has received many prestigious awards like PEN Josephine Miles Award and The American Book Award. There are many serials and movies which are based on her works. Her works are largely set in India and the U.S., and mainly deal with South Asian immigrants.

Divakaruni's act of immigration inspired her to share about those conflicts and problems, which she experienced during her settlement in the alien land and those experiences, are universal and appealing. In an interview to Neila C. Seshadri 2001, she states that she began to write:

"About what was importance in my life, and one of the big things was the act of immigration and the ways in which it had changed me, the ways in which it had really made me see the world differently and see my place as a women in the world differently, the ways in which it had made me appreciate my own culture as well as question of my own culture, and my life in India, and all that was very important to me".(Divakaruni)

Divakaruni, being an Indian immigrant woman, writes about the plight of Indian women in America. Her writings reconnect her emotionally and physically to her immigrant status. She has shown the power of her tradition of her native country as well as the challenges faced by the immigrants in her adopted land. Like other Indian diasporic writers, Divakaruni is also tackling the immigrant issues in her writings. Today, it can be well said that the most important writings by Indians are being done in the diaspora.

Initially, the term 'Diaspora' was used for scattering and exile of Jews from their homeland. In other words, it can be defined as a space changed with the possibilities of multiple challenges. Diasporic literature is a very vast concept and it includes all those writers who write outside their country and remain associated with their homeland through their writings. Generally, diasporic literature deals with loneliness, alienation, homelessness, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity and displacement. It explores the issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It shows the immigrant experience that is the result of immigrant settlement.

'The Mistress of Spices' belongs to the world of magic and experiences of the immigrant. The novel is a blend of fantasy and reality that complement each other rather than separating them. The world of magic is created by Tilo, the main protagonist of the novel. The whole story of the novel moves round Tilo who is present in every chapter of the novel with her mystic nature. The novel does not just deal with the mystic nature of Tilo, but it goes far deeper than the surface reading. It highlights one major issue of identity crisis in a foreign land that is the main feature of diasporic literature.

The story is about Tilo, the mistress of spices who runs a spice store in Oakland in America. She is trapped in two cultures, her heritage and new found world. The two worlds in which Tilo finds herself trapped is the harsh reality of Indian immigrants in America and it becomes the question of an individual's quest for identity. The spice store of Tilo is joined by the immigrants and they share their immigrant experiences and their own individual story with Tilo.

From the beginning of the end, the transformation of Tilo can be seen in the novel. She was born with super natural powers to see the future. As a daughter, she was given the name Nayan Tara that was quite contrary to her parent's love to her daughter. After Nayan Tara she transforms into Bhagyavati, a name given to her by pirates. Finally, she meets old woman whom she calls first mother. The sense of security and love is given to her by first mother. Before coming into the contact of first mother, the serpents rescue her; 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.

The problem of identity is the big issue in diasporic literature. Due to her multiple identities, Tilo keeps changing throughout the novel and reveals how complex is the problem of identity crisis which immigrants feel in a foreign country. The journey of Tilo's life can be seen through various phases. From Nayan Tara, she becomes Bhagyavati during her stay with pirates. Then she transforms into Tilo and finally Maya during her love episode. The name Maya also creates an illusion which is created by author to enhance the magical charm in the novel and it gives deep understanding to understand her character.

The body is a significant feature of identity both in appearance and action. Usually, a person is judged on the basis of his physical construction like tall, short, thin and fat, and on the basis of dressing sense and physical complexion as light skinned and dark skinned. Due to the physical difference, immigrants suffer a lot in foreign land because of the difference of their American counterparts. In the novel, Divakaruni shows the horrific effect of diaspora on the physical condition of the immigrant. This picture of discrimination can be seen in the case of many characters in the novel.

Jagjit, a Sikh boy suffers from this violence; he is humiliated in school-by-school boys because of his wearing a green turban and his long uncut hair. His pain of rejection makes him a rebellious and in this process he loses his identity which marks a journey of transformation. It shows that it is not only elders but children also suffer in adopted land and like elders children also miss their country and their people.

Though the meaning of Jagjit is world conqueror but due to humiliation and rejection in the school, he is not able to conquer his own emotions. The pain of humiliation and laughter

remains in his consciousness every time and leaves in his consciousness a scar. As a result, he becomes rebellious and rejects everything Indian even he changes his name from Jagjit to Jag or Jaggi.

Mohan is another victim of racial discrimination in America. He became the prey of the ruffians when he refuses to give them a bottle while shutting his restraint for the night. He is humiliated and abused by ruffians "Son of a bitch Indian should a stayed in your goddamm country"(MS170). Seeing this humiliation Tilo muses "O Mohan broken in body broken in mind by America"(MS172). The scar of this humiliation is so deep rooted in his mind that he decides to leave America and returns to India his homeland.

Another victim of this violence in the novel is Haroun, a taxi driver who is from Kashmir. Due to terrorist attacks, he comes in America in the search of the betterment of life but the irony is that even in America he faces this racial discrimination and is attacked by the group of people who leave him in the state of an injured man.

Many immigrants who move to U.S. from south Asian countries experience the problem of English speaking. Immigrants often come from the different section of society where multiple languages are spoken simultaneously and English is used as a second language to communicate in multilingual society. But English, being a second language, does not provide nation- background touch. When immigrants come into the contact of host society, they do not fully express themselves before the host society due to the languages barriers. It creates hindrances, challenges and prevents effective interaction, and block healthy interpersonal relation within a diasporic community. Due to the languages barriers, the problem of adjustment have been challenging for immigrants on multiple levels and it creates feeling of alienation in the immigrants. So every time living in America, immigrants have the feelings of nostalgia where they can fully express their feelings and emotions with their people.

In the novel, the spice bazaar where Tilo runs a spice store covers the whole Indian community of Oakland. The people from different section of Indian society visit the store to express their feelings, concerns, needs and to find solace in the company of Tilo who has the same origin of immigrants.

Indian living in America faces the cultural conflicts in an adopted land. In order to survive in adopted land, they have to adjust and assimilate themselves with new environment. In the novel, Tilo, the central figure tries to bridge the gap between two different cultures with her spices. By using her spices, she solves the problems of immigrants in settling in adopted land and gives a new meaning to their lives in finding new identity. In this way, she works like a synthesizer for immigrants in this new environment.

Cultural clash is another issue of diasporic literature which immigrants face during their settlement in a foreign land. In the novel, clash of Indian American culture can be seen in the case of Geeta and her grandfather. Her grandfather is sad on seeing her life style which is quite opposite of his culture and tradition of India. In his conversation with Geeta, the touch of Indianness is clearly seen. As he says

“That Geeta, how much make-up she is using all the time. Uff in my days only the English and the prostitutes were doing that. Good Indian girls were not ashamed of the face God has given them....”

When the grandfather sees Geeta's short cut hair, he is shocked to see that because he has Indian mindset that having long hair is the essence of womanhood. On his grandfather's statement Geeta replies “Oh Grandpa I need a new look” (MS89).

Geeta very frankly speaks to her parents about her love for Jaun Candero who is Chicano. On seeing her granddaughter's behavior, he is sad and unable to tolerate his presence in the house so he decides to return to India. It shows how cultural clash changes the meaning of the relations where everybody tries to prove himself to be right.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni deals the issues of women in most of her novels. The Mistress of Spices also deals with women issues as love, duty cultural woman and most important the place of woman in contemporary world. Divakaruni as a south Indian diasporic writer has presented the rise of the new woman to a great extent. Hussain in her observation on the writings of south Asian diasporic writes comments:

“The new women in their [South Asian Diasporic Writers] writings are not elevated on a pedestal as goddess but are depicted with their human flaws. Their predicaments are shown as a rite of passage as they pass through process that symbolizes the transformations from restriction to freedom.”

Divakaruni's women are both traditional and modern in their way of living. They are conventional when they sacrifice themselves to make other happy but when the matter comes of their personal choice they become unconventional. They challenge the accepted norms of society and violate it and come out of those traditional boundaries in order to establish their own identity. In Mistress of Spices, it can be seen in the case of Tilo that there are certain laws made by first mother for mistress of spices which should be followed. But Tilo breaks those laws during her love episode or her transformation and give new meaning to her life. She is fed up with her life limited to the spices. Her acceptance of Ravan, the Native American despite the anger of spices shows her rejection with the confined world which is filled by certain codes of

rules. Tilo is the voice of today's generation exploring one's identity and inner desire, and trying to violate the boundaries that divide the world into different section.

Like other diasporic writers, Divakaruni also tries to glorify her own culture through her writings. Her immigrant experience compels her to peep into the heart of her culture. Through the novel, *Mistress of Spices* she provokes the Americans to see and understand the richness of India, Indian culture and Indian spices. We know that India is a country of spices and Indian spices are world famous due to their smell and taste. From beginning up to the end, spices play very important role in the novel. The innovative method of introducing spices with their origin and the myths associated with them shows their spiritual and symbolic meaning in Indian culture and tradition. Every spice is blessed with human qualities and Tilo uses these spices to cure the sufferings of immigrants.

After studying the novel, it can be concluded that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Mistress of Spices* shows the picture of predicament of multi-ethnic groups with a very spicy flavor. The novel also reveals many of the complex issues and conflicts that immigrants experience in America that becomes important in diasporic literature. The main issues of Indian immigrants are the issues of survival and identity in diaspora. It is clear that "as migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioral boundaries...One's life and role change. With them identities change as well."(Espin, "Gender")

Though such experiences are painful but they give the opportunities for developing a new 'global identity' or 'hybrid identity'. Divakaruni makes an appeal of 'togetherness' through her writings. She writes to unite people breaking stereotype of defining one's identity on the basis of socio and political conditions.

References:

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffins, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Mistress of Spices*. United States: Doubleday. 6 Feb 1997. Print.
- ---Interview by Neila C. Scheshadri. *Writings as Spritual Experience: A Conversation with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni*. *Weber Studies*. 8.2(2001) Web. 16 March 2012.
- Hussain, Yasmeeen. *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture, Ethnicity*. USA: Ashgate, 2005. Print.