

**KNOW THYSELF: QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
*THE MISTRESS OF SPICES***

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the study of an emerging, potent voice of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*. Belonging to India, gives this writer certain common cultural traits and the fact that living abroad widens the mental horizons of Indian women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was conditioned by the Indian upbringing but has risen above the traditional constraints. Divakaruni's writing primarily deals with the immigrant women's quest for identity, freedom and independence. This paper attempts to analyze immigrant women's quest for identity, freedom and independence in the novel *The Mistress of Spices*.

Keywords: Diaspora, Freedom, Identity, Independence, Immigration.

In the entire range of diaspora literature, it has categorically been accepted that the geographical shift of locations essentially generates the psyche of rootlessness and marginality. Immigrant writers venture to investigate the discontent of new settlers making desperate attempts to seek their roots and identity in distant cultural surrounding haunted by the lingering shadows in their homeland.

Most of the immigrants construct the images of home amid the feeling of homelessness. Dom Mores in his analysis of the experiences of immigration concludes that the idea of home in itself is an illusion. He admits, "He has become desireless in so far as determining his desired point of location in the world" (Moroa: 340). In this double consciousness of home and homelessness, immigrants find themselves struggling between two cultures.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the novels like *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams* and *The Vine of Desire* constructs a comprehensive search for identity. She has tried to promote the idea that the realisation of “otherness”, the loss of identity and uncompromising national consciousness constitute the phenomenon of rootlessness in the life of immigrants. It is therefore in immigrant literature that there is often “a celebration of elemental simplicities and home spun emotional reality” (Sharma: 17). Immigrants search out new Homes’ to escape the anguish of “homelessness”.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* is basically a novel constructed on the lines of the technique of Magic Realism. In the background of myth, magic and romance, she presents a wide spectrum of the life and longing existing in the experiences of immigrants. The narrator in the novel is Tilo, a young woman born in another time in a faraway place. She is an expert in the ancient art of spices and is therefore respected as ‘Mistress’ charged with the special power of magic related with spices. With the passage of time she travels to Oakland, California where she manages a store of spices. She is well acquainted with the specific properties of each spice and recommends spices to her customers with meticulous advice of the curative value of those spices. In this galaxy of customers, once she gets fascinated with the personality of a young boy. With the romantic longing for him, she is supposed to lose control over her powers as the mistress of spices.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents the ‘store of spices’ as the meeting point of all immigrants. She not only provides them Indian spices but also inspires them to share their personal agonies with her. The entire novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, has been classified with the names of different spices. In the early part of the novel, Tilo reveals her own past and her history of migration from the world of magic to the multicultural society of America. With all sympathy she shares the anguish and experience of immigrants who had chosen America as a land of their dreams. She declares her mission of life, “It seems right that I should have been here always, that I should understand without words their longing for the ways they chose to have behind when they chose America” (5). Regarding the purpose of the store, she admits, “The store is an excursion into the land of might-have-been. A self-indulgence, dangerous for a brown people who come from elsewhere, to whom real Americans might say *Why?*” (6). Through such an effort she seeks the fulfillment in her own life because her own vision of life is torn between the fragmentation of past and present. Divakaruni establishes that the twilight of ‘here’ and ‘there’ hinders the process of ‘wholeness’.

Among Tilo’s customers, the first customer is Ahuja’s wife, a young and beautiful

immigrant woman. The glamour of wealth fascinates her for a marriage with an American. Like other immigrant women, she struggles with her own feelings of isolation and homelessness. Tilo realizes that Abuja's wife is a victim of cultural apathy and male domination. She tries to record her inner crisis, "All day at home, she is so lonely, the silence like quicksand sucking at her wrists and ankles. Tears she cannot stop, disobedient tears like spilled pomegranate seeds, and Abuja shouting when he returns home to her swollen eyes" (15). In her immigration, Abuja's wife becomes more sensitive to her thwarted motherhood. Tilo, being a woman, has the realization of the pain of immigrant woman who survives with double insecurity resisting the forces of gender apathy and cultural antagonism. She confesses, "This pain stung like live coals in my chest as the pirates flung me onto the deck of their ship, as we took sail, as the flaming line of my homeland disappeared over the horizon" (19). Abuja's wife survives in American society with the insecurity that she will never be able to get her roots there.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, like women writers of Indian Diaspora, articulates in her books, "The deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and here (U.S.A.) show them emerging at least in many cases as stronger and self-reliant woman" (Kamatih: Interview). Tilo's sympathy remains only with women immigrants but also with the frustrated male immigrants like Jagjeet. Her store becomes a centre for Indian immigrants to relieve their pain and to redefine their position. In their pain, she recollects her own journey: how she was thrown on Dal Lajko and was compelled to row Shikara for the pleasure of American tourists. She was promised, "Great things will happen to you in this new land, this America" (25). For Tilo the opportunity to share the anguish of immigrants becomes a defense mechanism, a safer outlet of her unexpressed fears and uncertainty. She declares her own mission "I, Tilo, architect of American Dream".

Tilo's emotional involvement with the suffering of immigrants makes her indifferent to her power to magic. A voice echoes in her ears, "A mistress must carve her own wanting own of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the need of those she serve" (71). The conversion in her life stirs her suppressed feminine consciousness and subsequently leads to her fascination for Raven, a sensitive American youth. She identifies all her sentiments and love with Raven and calls him "my lonely American." She mentions that on Saturday evening there is a whole rush of Indian immigrants to her store with different voices. She says, "So many people on Saturday, it seems the wall must take a deep breath just to hold them in. All those voices asking for more than their words, as for happiness except no one seems to know where" (81). Her longing represents the longing for homeland existing in mind of immigrants. She as a mistress of spices remains an onlooker to perceive the reality of the life of American immigrants. In one of her interviews, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni confesses, "Moving away from a home culture often

allows a kind of disjunctive perspective that is very important- a slight sense of being an outsider being out of place. (Interview: Bolick)

In Tilo's-list of customers, there is a specific reference to Geeta who was brought up by her grandparents in the background of Indian moral values. Grandparents do not compromise with liberal and emancipated ways of personal relationship encouraged in America. They express their aversion for the artificial make-up of Indian girls in America and prefer homespun values for Indian girls. Tilo tries to convince them that the amicable balance in the life of American immigrants is possible only through a fine synthesis of Indian and American styles of living. Geeta and her grandparents represent the two extreme sides of American life and sensibility. Tilo advises Geeta, "Who is India and America all mixed together into a new melody; be forgiving of an old man who holds on to his past with all the strength in his failing hand" (90). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni admits that the presence of racial consciousness in the mind of immigrants stirs the fooling of otherness and hinders the process of assimilation.

Swayed by racial prejudice, Geeta's grandparents do not give their consent to the marriage of Geeta with a white, Joan Cordero. They make contemptuous remarks to prevent their daughter from taking such a radical decision. She comments, "You are losing your caste and putting black Kali on our ancestors faces to marry a man who is not even a sahib, whose people are slum, criminals and illegal" (92-93). The fascination of Indian immigrants for American opulence has been appreciated by Tilo. She expresses her fancy in the following words:

A mirror, a color T.V. so that I may see into the heart of America, into the heart, I hope of lonely American. A make up kit with everything in it. Perfume of rose and lavender, shoes several pairs in different colors, the last ones red as burnished chillies. Clothes more clothes—dresses pant suits sweaters, the intricate wispy mysteries of American feminine underwear. And last of all a bed robe of white lace like raindrops caught in a spider's web. (138)

Against these lurking fantasies, Tilo is warned not to step over the threshold of "prohibited American." Her power of magic and supernatural world is like a cover to escape the horrors of dislocation. The involvement in personal relationship is prohibited; still it is difficult for her to resist the temptation of Raven with a heavy heart. She admits, "Perhaps one day American I will be able to tell you of it. I, Tilo who has until now been the patient listener, the solver of everyone else's problems" (163). She admits that she has tried to seek wholeness in the form of the management of the store of spices for Indian immigrants. Divakaruni in her speculation of the life of immigrants expresses her consensus that most of the immigrants suffer with the burden of "Divided Identity" along with the pain of inferiority.

Tilo's decision to leave her magic world and to enter into the life of immigrants in general and Raven in particular is a symbolic manifestation of her urge to get adjusted to American life. Further, her excessive passion for the company of Raven shows that she also adopts a personal relationship as a panacea to escape her loneliness, to realize her neglected humanity and finally to seek possibilities of assimilation in American life. In the company of Raven she finds the fulfillment of the promises of life. Finally she retains her feminine delicacy. She confesses, "Air! My American at last I have found someone with whom I can share, how it is to live the mistress life, that beautiful terrible burden" (216). For Tilo, it is not only the question of the involvement in the life of Raven but also the life of all those with whom she can share her pain of displacement. By the end of the novel, when she unites with Raven, it is not the union of two individuals but the union of two cultures, two countries and the two contradictory currents of thoughts. Raven intends to give a name to Tilo different from all those names that are the markers of national identity. Tilo prefers to choose the name "Maya" because it seems to be the only amicable solution to come out of the illusion of duality existing within the consciousness of immigrants. Defining the implication of the word Maya, she admits, "In old language, it can mean many things, illusion, spell enchantment, the power that keep this imperfect world going day after day, I need a name like that, I who now have only myself to hold me up." (338) It is Tilo's final reaffirmation of her identity to escape the dilemma of two cultures:

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's as a writer of Diaspora, promotes the aesthetics of affirmation. Tilo's sentimental longing for all Indian immigrants in general and Raven in particular suggests that she adopts the poetics of exile to retain her Identity as an Indian woman. (Dometrio: 1996)

It is a distinction of the vision of Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* that she constructs the entire phenomenon with the thrill and excitement of child without being a prey to self-imposed "otherness" often to be found in the life of immigrants and the underneath echoing voice of immigrant writers. The trials and tribulations and the struggle to maintain the modern values and to carve out an identity of their own in the new and ostensibly stifling environment of her protagonist makes her feminist.

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