



TILO -A CREATIVITY OF DIASPORIC UNIQUENESS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVEL *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

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Dr. N. VADIVU

Assistant Professor,

Department of Humanities and Languages,

Sona College of Technology,

Salem, Tamilnadu. India.

Email id: vadivun@sonatech.ac.in

Abstract

Divakaruni recapitulates the lost traditions and myths of her homeland through evoked memories of bygone times, place, and people. She projects the inner conflicts ranging within a woman who has to take a resolution if she has to live for herself or for the welfare of others. Divakaruni's novel 'The Mistress of spices' exhibits exile and emigration in its varied forms. In the novel 'The Mistress of Spices', Tilo the protagonist undoubtedly fits into this category. Chitra Banerjee presents the immigrant experience of Tilo in pragmatic terms mixed with tradition and fantasy. This novel is a juxtaposition of the past and present existence of Tilo. Negotiating the immigrant experience in The Mistress of Spices Divakaruni deftly builds an enthralled narrative upon the flaw line in American identity that lies between the self and the society. Humanism flows throughout the novel with an ardent eye on social issues. This paper aims to present the protagonist -Tilo as an imagination of diasporic identity. Tilo, the mistress of spices, has many guises and names that divulge her multiple identities. Like a Chameleon, she keeps changing herself throughout the novel, revealing how intricate the dilemma of identity crisis is.

Key Words: Diasporic, magic, immigrant, uniqueness, multifaceted

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The author through an altruistic character like Tilo, depicts how immigrants strive to complement themselves with the shifting priorities in their life. The past life of Tilo reveals the fact that she was destined as a mistress of spices by the Old one- the First mother, who trained her to become a mistress of spices. Her past life is subjugated by fantasy and magic. Her present life is related to her overhaul as a mistress in a spice store in California. In diasporic literature, time and space are multifaceted entities because they do not have static dimensions. There is relationship between the memory of 'there' and the time of 'here'. The words of Divakaruni almost echo the words of Robin Cohen:

Diasporas are positioned somewhere between nation-states and 'Travelling cultures' in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state physical sense, but travelling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside that nation-state's space/time zone. (135)

Tilottama (Tilo) the raconteur of the novel is born in India. She is trained to be a 'Mistress of spices' and is ultimately deployed to run a spice shop in Oakland, California. Tilo, chooses America willingly and supports people open their cherished feelings and restore them back to health. The Spice shop, for illustration, created in The Mistress of Spices is a setting which helps to fetch exiled



people collectively and offer them consolation.

Tilo is born in a poor family. She is born unattractive and is considered redundant in her small village. She pronounces how her birth made her parents gloomy, 'another girl child and this one coloured like mud. Wrap her in old cloth, lay her face down on the floor' (MS 7). She is considered as an undesirable child according to her parents, because she didn't bring anything to the family apart from a dowry debt. Girl babies are epitomized with dowry debt and dowry obligation which at times end their lives. Tilo faces gender discrimination at the very early stage in her life. She is named as 'Nayantara' and is discarded by her family for the scandal of being born a female. This testifies the suppression of women in a patriarchal society. Tilo is left abandoned in the village with no one to pay attention to. This state of affairs exhibits the hypocrisy of the society which doesn't welcome a girl child but worships Goddess.

Tilo becomes renowned in the Indian village. She foresees the natural calamities like flood and earthquake and where, under the earth, the gold lay buried. People start believing that even a stroke of her can change their lucks. Tilo's gift is her skill in bringing forth the precise power inherent in spices and utilizes them to cure the maladies of those around her. Though she is always surrounded by the village folk, and contemplated as someone extraordinary, it doesn't acclaim her much. She feels forlorn from inside.

Divakaruni through her protagonist wishes to affirm that loneliness haunts a person if they are cast out by their loved ones. Nayanthara experiences estrangement in her own village. Edward Said mentions his view on immigrants feeling lost while leaving one's inhabited place behind.

Exile is strangely compelling to think about possible to experience. It is the unreliable rift forced between being and

a native place, between the self and its true home: sadness can never be surmounted (173).

An individual can be in a figurative exilic state of psyche both in the native soil as well as in diaspora which makes them venerable on the contemplation of their roots and heritage.

Nayantara's identity of being 'a star seer' doesn't appease her and she longs for a new identity. "Proud and willful" (MS 9), Nayantara becomes agitated with her tiresome life which comprises of "the endless praise, the songs of adulation, the fearful deference" (MS 17). She longs to exile from her village as she feels alienated. She desires to break the monotony and aspires to lead a new life. The barrenness she experiences forces her to send a calling thought to the pirates and thereby invite chaos. She feels emotional and pleads, "Fathers, sisters, forgive me, I who had been Nayan Tara, who had wanted your love but only won your fear. Forgive me, my village, I who in boredom and disappointment did this to you" (MS 19).

At this juncture, pirates' storm into her home, slay her entire family and abduct her. They take her on board in their ship as a prisoner. Her desire gets fulfilled in the form of pirates' invasion into her village. They take her away with them to make fortune. Divakaruni presents Tilo as a character who is inextricably bonded in the workings of diaspora. The entire notion of 'home' becomes exiled and is transformed into an intangible condition that is not based on a singular location but rather a progress among many places. As Tilo's identity is trivial and void she forges a pioneering identity as the pirate queen -Bhagyavathi. This brand-new identity too for no reason accords Tilo the accomplishment she longs for. Becoming the queen of pirates, she chases triumph but is deprived of a true identity.

The sea serpents save Bhagyavathi from the typhoon. The snakes are her



Guardians, right from her childhood days. Snakes are worshipped in India as Gods and Goddesses' since ancient times. They continue to serve and guard her. The snakes tell her about the enchanted island of spices and the 'First mother' or the 'Old One', who has been there forever. Tilo is tempted to go to the enchanted island of spices, but the serpents persuade her to go with them.

Bharati Mukherjee anticipates the possibility of transformation of identities in diaspora and observes, that, "In the diasporic age, one's biological identity may not be the one as erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration" (32). The diasporic consciousness in 'Bhagyavathi' displays a fragmented mindscape of immigrants across geographical and cultural spaces. Right from her childhood days Tilo has a fascination for the spice island. She abandons this exalted position offered by the mystical sea serpents when they tell her about the existence of an island upon which she, and other women like her, can build upon their supernatural talents in utilization for a greater good.

Tilo resumes her journey and sails upon a ship to the island of the Mistresses. A reference to the 'kalipani', or 'dark water', is made by Divakaruni to describe the journey made by indentured labourers and immigrants from the motherland of India to other foreign lands, creating what we today refer to as the 'diaspora'. In fact, Tilo represents, the journey of a woman not only from innocence to maturity but also a voyage that criss-crosses the realm of reality and magic.

At the hub of each diasporic sensation lies the conception of 'home'. The diasporas endure lives of an 'in-between' state which emanates in estrangement. Often migrants are caught between a space where they live negotiating their past and their present selves. A sense of nostalgia lures them from within, that gets reflected in comparative parameters through their interaction with the new place and culture; through changing

frameworks of family and relations; and through varying levels of insights. In Divakaruni's, *Mistress of Spices* we discover a sort of diaspora that pays the price of getting exiled. Since it is a conscious decision, Avtar Brah surmises:

The notions of displacement and diaspora are, then, in a dialogic relationship with each other. While the idea of displacement suggests the loss of familiar space and emphasizes the need to transform, the notion of diaspora emphasizes the connections between the displaced. (192-193)

The experience of exile and the tendency to remember the past induces in immigrants an ambivalence that causes them to transcend boundaries. This Island is the first diasporic space that Tilo encounters. This secluded island is a haven for those women, who call themselves the 'Mistresses of Spices'. They are under the concern of the 'First Mother' the eldest and wisest teacher of all women. The women are skilled in the art of listening and controlling the spices, in the island and are then sent forth into the greater world to assist humanity.

Divakaruni deliberately presents the island with only women in order to provide power and autonomy for their survival. The 'Old One' is the most alluring woman on the island. Research reveals that, "within immigrant communities, traditional gender-role behaviours are often demanded from women immigrants" (Grewal 54) and patriarchal power remains even after migration (53).

The First Mother represents the conservative impression of the South Asian woman in the domestic orb. She is at, a juxtaposition of contradictory ecological space, time and ethnicity. Yet at the same time, she is outside the boundaries of conventional culture, for she dwells on a



remote island. She possesses miraculous powers and urges the young girls toward development and transformation rather than the maintenance of the status quo. The First Mother briefs the women, "Daughters it is time for me to give you your new names. For when you came to this island you left your old names behind and have remained nameless since" (MS 42). Tilo has already begun her diasporic journey. According to Okwui Enwezor

[The diasporic space [is] the quintessential late 20th-century space, a space in which the terms of modern immigration, exile, loss, nation, subject, and citizen are negotiated and reinvented for various uses". (88)

After Tilo masters all that she can, she is sent to Oakland, California, to a tiny Indian spice shop where she begins her duties of healing the masses. Tilo is the illustration of the 'old world and the new world'. The narrative of diaspora is a split narrative; it has several pasts and each of the different diaspora has a different history, different tradition, and different regional and linguistic equation. The 'past' and 'present' and the 'here' and 'there' for them are in multiples.

Divakaruni skilfully employs the appalling effects of diaspora on the physical condition of the immigrants. Since the body is accepted as a noteworthy element of identity, such representations clutch great power so as the transformations in Tilo. Tilo enters a luminal threshold -a space between the past and the future without precise knowledge of where the present is.

Tilo is unmoored and treads the dark water between the lands of her past and the lands of her future, a theme that will persist throughout the text in representation of the

relationship between time and space. Thus, she is thrust into the chaos of American life and the newness of a culture to which she must acclimatize. Dislocation today is ascribed and substantiated as the distinctive feature of humanity and not just a feature of the Diasporas alone. Divakaruni's depiction of diaspora shows deliberate migration and amendment of changes whole heartedly by her characters. Tilo too is forcefully taken away by the pirates, and she eventually migrates to America. It implies crossing of borders and boundaries, moving from one culture to another. It entails a break of the old identity and the creation of a new identity.

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