



DIASPORIC TESTIMONIALS FROM AN EXCEPTIONAL HEROIN TILO'S PERSPECTIVE IN THE MISTRESS OF SPICES BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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ABSTRACT

Departing homeland and colonizing overseas is a major course of action, a life evolving event in the true sense of the words. Migrants generally leave behind everything – the family, friends, social circle, culture and on the whole personal identity to search for a better future. It is a widespread belief and - true to an extent - that shifting abroad will improve your life and the lives on those who depend on you. It is always made to sound all unduly straightforward to settle and prosper in western countries as an immigrant. The immigrant's life is habitually portrayed to be full of opulence and trouble-free. But this is far from the real truth. Undoubtedly many of these countries are reckon to be the land of opportunities replete with promise. The amenities of everyday life and expedience of advanced society combined with buying power of the dollar offer a lot of temptation and glamour. However, the reality is much different and an immigrant is thrash with the fact about life soon. The fact is that challenges non-native are very genuine and bar to succeed are much excessive for an immigrant. It is not one or two lone issues but a synthesis of many such problems that generate the real exposure to abroad, an experience absolutely dissimilar than anyone presume.

Diaspora writing has gradually come forth as one of the prime sphere in the field of Indian Writing in English voicing immigrant experience and cautiously tackling the issues of cultural dilemmas and displacement, self and identity, nostalgia and loss, sense of pleasure and triumph as experienced by immigrants. This paper aims to examine these issues incidental with immigrant experience as expressed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. (1997)

Key Words: Diaspora, Indian immigrants, multiculturalism, identity crises, Indian-American diaspora, hyperreality.

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INTRODUCTION

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* accredits a more elaborate strategy for portraying diasporic identity. Through her main character of Tilo, Divakaruni is able to survey stereotypes,

cultural relations, immigrant clashes, and more. She makes use of fable in order to tour the diverse kinds of problems faced by immigrants. Though Tilo's story takes center stage, there are many secondary players that Tilo tries to help over the course of the

story. Divakaruni herself admits the cause writing this novel:

"I wrote in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable." (Qtd. Asian Review of Books on Internet).

Identity is a very absorbing hypothesis in literature. Many contemporary literary texts rotate around this idea. A number of themes in literature pivot on identity. Identity has been defined by Spencer A. Rathus and Jeffrey S. Nevid in their book, *Adjustment and Growth: The Challenges of Life* as "an individual's perception of who she he or she is" (Rathus 1980:28). They discuss about the need of every individual to have a secure identity, and what will happen if that person loses his sense of identity.

"When that self-identity is threatened by disease, tragedy, personal crises, or awareness that our actions are inconsistent with our values, we may experience anxiety, panic, a sense of loss of self and a feeling of being cut adrift from life's purposes and meaning." (Rathus 1980:30).

Tilo, as an Exceptional Heroine

As a heroine, Tilo gives the impression of being an exceptional one than any other protagonists owing to her unusual role in this story. Tilo has been addressed by almost four different names symbolizing four contradictory and mystifying identities in a single life time. She lasts an enigma both for the readers and herself since her truth and identity is multi-layered. Furthermore Divakaruni proposes a thought of being reborn everytime after the symbolic death of her protagonist's earlier identity just like the mythical bird phoenix which is reborn out of its own ashes. Tilo and her battle to lead life on her own terms epitomize the intuitive power of human being to swim against the tide and succeed in life with dream and aspiration. Tilo does not give up or leave trying even after failure. She renews her life and efforts from where she left behind in her previous attempt. Tilo was baptized Nayan-Tara at the time of her birth, and later she was called Bhagyavati when she was abducted by pirates to benefit as their lucky

charm. She survives a fierce storm to be washed ashore to her new destiny as an apprentice learning the secret power of the spices in a scheduled island far removed from the materialist world in which she has grown up. After her apprenticeship, she ends up in America where she strives to serve to the difficulties of the local expatriate Indian community under the fictitious name Tilo, with a seemingly aged and curved physical body regulated by the effect of the magical fire of Shampati.

The novel tracks down the clashing emotions and feelings which she goes through. Being a mistress she could not yearn to live a normal life with human relationships, feeling and emotions if she desires to preserve her power over the spices. If she went hostile to the limits of the spices, then she would be devoid of all her power over them. Despite that, she is involved into a love affair with a lonely American, Raven, against her wish as his life evokes her of her own life and her fight with its incompatible realities. Due to this, Tilo provisionally loses her power only to reconquer them at the end of the novel, and in the process remaking herself as Maya, who could make the spices follow her commands, and at the same time have a personal life of her own. The novel traces all these alterations of name, character and personality with massive refinement.

Tilo's metaphysical powers bestow on the ability to feel others' problems and recommends answers to them by pinpointing the exact and suitable spice. Her foremost concern is Indian immigrants residing in California, far away from their homeland, and so far unable to detach the hidden alliance with India, the land of their origin. Many of Tilo's customers are seeking for something genuine and reliable to which they can grasp to, and which would discharge as a secure mainstay around which their existence could spin. In Tilo's spice shop they stumble on memories of a past they could never leave behind despite trying to lead a westernized existence in distant America.

Diasporic Testimonials in *The Mistress of Spices*

The Mistress of Spices is a depiction of the endeavor and deep upheaval experienced by a population which has moved politically, geographically, socially and culturally from its

homeland India, and is trying to socialize with a new existence in an alien land. Accordingly, it can also be read and explored using the concept of Diaspora. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo and the customers whom she aims to help are all striving to re-initiate their affiliation with India with the support of an ancient heritage which they share in common. The spices and their mystery is idiosyncratic linkage which makes them reminisce about their common past with nostalgia.

Divakaruni exemplifies somber identity of woman through the character of Lalita, Tilo's first customer. Lalita gradually discloses her demolished married life to Tilo. Her husband is very possessive for her in an evil manner and intimidates her physically. He always keeps her under surveillance consequently she appears ambivalent constantly even when buying the grocery in Tilo's shop. Her story approximates to the other immigrant women who cannot make their identity in the foreign land although they have enough talent and desire too, to prosper in their domains. Lalita longs for a child but she could not conceive because of her husband's physical imperfection.

"Child-longing, deepest desire, deeper than for wealth or lover or even death." (MOS, p. 16).

Tilo realizes that Lalita is a victim of cultural apathy and male domination. Her story is a story of dispossession. She left the organized and affluent life at her father's house, when she was married to a ferocious man, an alcoholic who mistreats her. Regrettable in domestic life she aspires to lead again in America, but she cannot drown out those voices of conditioning that outlined womanly duties for her.

Haroun, a taxi driver by profession is a frequent visitor of Tilo's store. He is a modest and credulous person, struggling to establish himself in America and at the same time encountering inferior treatment by the inhabitants of the foreign land. But possessing an optimistic vision towards life, he always wears a smile and survives deep-seated in America. He has trust in Tilo, so whenever he undergoes strain, surely visit Tilo's store to share his tough time and asks her to find some solution as

well as keeps hope that Tilo can tell his future occurrences.

"Lady please to kindly read my palm."
(MOS, p.26).

She feels pity for him seeing his hardened and scared palms. He narrates about it in normal tone,

"Back home we are boat man in Dal Lake, grandfather and father and I, we row our *shikara* for tourists from America-Europe. (MOS, p. 26).

Tilo didn't want to hear more as she sensed his past already in the lines rising rigid and dark as thunder from his palm, she relieves him telling his fortune in America.

"It looks good, very good. Great things will happen to you in this new land, this America." (MOS, p.28).

Tilo could foresee that Haroun's life in America is in danger, and unfortunately she is right. Haroun gets assaulted rigorously by some local robbers when he was working late night. Tilo turns irked on herself that she did late to reach out Haroun to make him safe from such attacks, in spite of knowing that he is in danger from the native burglars and envious people in this new land. As an immigrant his life in America is awfully strenuous and uncertain.

Jagjit, another sufferer Indian immigrant who visits Tilo's store with his mother, habitually stands partly behind her, his fingers holding her sari although he is ten and a half already. His mother always talks with him in shrill voice. Tall as a wild bamboo, with his thin petrified wrists, Jagjit has a trouble in the school as he knows only Punjabi still, whom the teacher has put in the last row has learnt his first English word 'Idiot'. Shy-eyed Jagjit wears a turban on his head which reveals his typical Punjabi look. For American kids it's a fun making medium to put Jagjit down. Tilo attempts to approach him, makes him feel homely and admires him telling the meaning of his name that Jagjit means world-conqueror.

In the playground kids try to pull his turban off his head. They dangle the cloth from their fingertip and mock at his long, uncut hair then push him down. His knees bleed from the gravel. He bites down on his lip to suppress his sobs. He picks up his muddy turban and ties it on slowly and goes

inside. After the word 'Idiot', the second English word for him 'asshole'. His mother often gets annoyed finding his school uniform stained and messy repeatedly. He does not like to go to school because of the offensive conduct towards him endlessly which is now intolerant for him. He is fed up of the jeering voices, the spitting mouths, the hands that pull his pants down in the playground.

"Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole." (MOS, p.39).

Tilo distinguishes the agony of Jagjit and wants to safeguard the juvenile mind in advance of collapse and be overcome. Jagjit is a wounded soul who is a victim of insecurity, suppression, and inferiority complex. He is careworn by his schoolmates but cannot take the liberty of protest them that being so inhabitants of the alien land take advantage of his fidelity.

Geeta's grandfather, a retired military major is the most elderly person to visit Tilo's store. He still walks like his position though it has been twenty years. His son encourages him to join him in America to stay with his family, whereas he in truth dreams of devote his remaining life in his own country surrounded by his people. He doesn't like the lifestyle and values of Americans followed by his son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter Geeta. Therefore it has been difficult for him to stay with them. Geeta is the center of his disillusionment by the time being as she has been entering in her adolescent phase. Tilo tries to dissuade the grandfather commending Geeta that she is a very sympathetic, charming and genteel girl, possibly he has been mistaken her. But he dismisses her compliments saying,

"May be OK for all these *firingi* women in this country, but you tell me yourself *didi*, if a young should work late-late in the office with other men and come home only after dark and sometimes in their car too?" (MOS, p.85).

Making his face in disgust he relates the situation in Jamshedpur that for such kind of behavior they would have smeared dung on her face. And nobody would marry her. Tilo tries him to convince,

"This is America after all, and even in India women are now working, no even in Jamshedpur." (MOS, p.85).

He firmly believes that so what if this is America, they are still Bengalis and the girls and boys are still the same. Each time he sets foot in with recently fuming tale. He complains that Geeta gets her hairdo too short that even her neck is revealed. She puts on heavy make-up all the time. It astonishes him because in his days only Englishwomen and prostitutes were acquainted with that. Good Indian girls are not ashamed of the face God has given them. But Tilo considers he might over-imagining the things unnecessarily.

Once, the grandfather enters in the store with unusual manner and bursts out loudly with disaster and righteousness but underneath the raw rasp of fear. He narrates the incident of the previous night that his old army friend is looking for a match for his grand-nephew. The boy is bright and having a prominent position in his profession. The grandfather is extremely happy and feels blessed that such a perfect alliance has been offered for his granddaughter. But when he announces the good news with his son Ramu, he identifies that he is not keen in this proposal as Geeta has brought up in America so would be unable to adjust in a big joint family in India. And Sheela, Geeta's mother doesn't want to send her only daughter so far away. Geeta, when comes to know about this proposal bursts into laugh saying ridiculously,

"Can you see me with a veil over my head sitting in a sweaty kitchen all day, a bunch of house keys tied to the end of my sari?" (MOS, p.88).

After some spiteful arguments with grandfather Geeta finally declares,

"I guess this is as good a time as any to let you know that I have already found someone I love." (MOS, p.89).

Three of them get atrociously traumatized to know her relationship with a foreigner and her adamant decision to marry him. Their reaction is tongue-tied and outraged at once. According to her grandfather she is losing her caste and putting black on her ancestors' face. Sheela is crying and wringing her hands and Ramu is sitting quiet but inflamed

limitlessly. Sheela doesn't want to see her face again. Geeta being mortified by her family's merciless treatment with her, declares that she is leaving the house and never come back. Sheela shouting through her sobs,

"Where you go is all the same for us, you shameless bad luck girl." (MOS, p.90).

Doors slam and collide like bursting. Weeping sound comes and goes for late hours. Geeta's predicament stems from the fact that, she is a part of paradigmatic diasporic family, where a clash between a first generation and second generation South Asian is inevitable.

The customers for whose safety Tilo had craved are contented and tranquil with their lives though not in the way which she had foreseen. All of them are on the threshold of making a new beginning, while she is at the cripple-end of her life as a Mistress of Spices in America. A terrible earthquake strikes as she is waiting for the fire of Shampati to flare and take her back to the island of spices. Amidst the giant scale of disaster, Raven accomplishes to trace her and takes her with him.

Conclusion

Today we are living in the world of cross-culture. Tilo falling in love with Raven and building a new world of their own signifies in the end of the novel a constructive frame of mind in obtaining new self and pave a room for exchange between the two cultures. Raven and Tilo are competent to collaborate with each other psychologically and can readily mount up their earthly paradise. The earthquake towards the end is symbolic. It manifests the eradication of the established order and a decaying of the disjointed cultures of the world. The novel is a beautiful piece of art presented in as a telescopic insight into the lives of immigrant in America.

Diaspora literature involves the idea of transposition of a person or a group of people from their homeland to alien place due to discrete force. Hence such a group of people could also be regarded a minority community living in exile. Writers of Indian origin living abroad like Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to name a few have traversed this concept and its expansion through their literary and critical works.

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