



MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S "THE MISTRESS OF SPICES"

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ABSTRACT

Identity crisis or search of identity has received an impetus in the Post-Colonial literature. Man is known as a social animal which needs some home, love of parents and friends and relatives. But when he is unhoused, he loses the sense of belongingness and thus suffers from a sense of insecurity or identity crisis. In the field of Indian English Literature, feminist or woman centered approach is the major development that deals with the experience and situation of women from the feminist consciousness. There is a transformation in the image of women characters in the last four decades. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the famous contemporary Indian English writers. Her novels give a perspective on women in their complex and real relationship. She seeks to portray the sensitive woman placed in a critical situation. She gives a unique portrayal of Indian womanhood in Post Independence India. Her novels reveal women's quest for self. This Paper attempts to highlight the trauma and situations of women protagonists and their struggle for identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*.

Keywords: Quest for identity, Alienation, Problems of assimilation, Self revelation, Suppression of Women and Magical realism.

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Indian Writing in English has acquired a great significance in recent years, not only in India but all over the world. Writers in English come from different parts of the country and they have diverse social, cultural and family backgrounds. In any appraisal of the Indian English Literature, an appreciation of the writing of its women is essential. The women fiction writers got the desired recognition and status with the arrival of writers like R.P.Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahyal, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Shashi Deshpande, Meena Alexander, Manju Kapur and Jhumpa Lahiri. These

writers are working on the cultural set-backs that determine the women's life. In diaspora literature, all women novelists have expressed their concern for the predicament of women in bi-cultural spaces. Each society recommends distinctive paradigms of female identity, female commitments, men and women relationship, feminist consciousness for religious, national and moral issues.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has emerged as prominent Indo-American writer. She has written poetry, short stories and novels. Her works have been translated into eighteen languages and two of her novels have been made into films. She has co-

founded MAITRI an organization that works with South Asian Women dealing with situation of domestic violence. She explores various themes like Women's issues, immigration, history, myth and the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world. In the galaxy of women writers of Indian diaspora, Chitra Banerjee has achieved a distinction of her innovative style, child like curiosity and the unconventional response to the scenario of diaspora and cultural displacement. Each novel of Divakaruni like a unique pearl retains its light and dazzle. She contextualizes the experiences of immigration not in the context of geographical dislocation only but also conceives the fabric of the plots of her novels in the background of magic, dream, fantasy and myth. Her Prominent novels are *The Mistress of Spices*(1997), *The Sister of my Heart*(1999), *The Vine of Desire*(2002), *Queen of Dreams*(2004), *Palace of Illusions*(2008) and *One Amazing Thing*(2010). She also develops a women centric approach to establish her vision in context of cultural displacement, loss of personal relationship and the haunting images of the homeland. Divakaruni in America set a direction of an unconventional mode of diaspora writings in which women protagonists appear to be caught in the conflict of two world ideologies. In the process of acculturation, they resist against the forces of patriarchy and also the prejudices of the East and West. The entire canvass of feminine experiences including the issues of motherhood, female sexuality, dynamics of marital harmony get coupled with the poetics of 'exile', 'aloofness', 'nostalgia', 'nationalism' and the quest for familial and personal relationship. In contrast to the illusion of emancipation, Indian women immigrants are doubly marginalized, weak and insecure. The cumulative efforts of the women writers prepared a new idiom of exile and empathy and expanded the horizons both of the feminist fiction and the immigrant narrative. Much of Divakaruni's work is partially autobiographical. Most of her stories are set in the Bay Area of California. She is invested in writing about the immigrant experience, which continues to have resonance in today's world.

Divakaruni explores the typical immigrant experience showing the mirror to Indian women wiggling out of stereotypes in American urban

landscapes through her novels. Her writing affirms that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion but an experience made up of collectivities and multiple journeys. It's an experience that is determined by who travels, where, how and under what circumstances. Almost all the expatriates who emigrated from India to America face the clash of opposing cultures, a feeling of alienation which is followed by the attempts to adjust, to adopt and to accept. Only the degree of this adaptation differs according to the generations. Her works primarily deals with difficulties in adjustment, nostalgia for home, inability to 'connect' on return visits to India, schizophrenic sense of double Indian and western identities or a sense of belonging to nowhere, neither here or there, remain the dominant feelings of the Indian immigrant.

The Concept of identity is very important for the diasporic people. Identity crisis or search of identity has received an impetus in the Post-Colonial literature. Man is known as a social animal which needs some home, love of parents and friends and relatives. But when he is unhoused, he loses the sense of belongingness and thus suffers from a sense of insecurity or identity crisis. This self evaluation is a preoccupation for diasporic women writers, but written in a different context rather different conclusions. There is constant interplay of nostalgia and reality in Divakaruni's novels. At a deeper level they show a conflict between tradition and modernity. 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 protagonists makes them a feminist. In the shorter fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the pain of exile has been exposed through the protagonists who are nostalgic of the past and in absence of any amicable solution, they compromise with the real life conditions. The self-preservation and self-realisation of her protagonists involve the consistent flux of memories between past and present, between homeland and host land, between glamour of the west and peace of the East. Her experiences as an immigrant writer have given her a flexible identity and the ability to define the past and the present through continuous communication with both the

cultures. Her characters continuously resist dislocation. They renegotiate their identities in the face of hardships.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the character Tilo provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for the feelings of homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience (Softky 1997). Divakaruni writes to unite people by destroying myths and stereotypes. As she breaks down these myths and stereotypes, she dissolves boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and even different worlds. She says, "Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life" (qtd. in Softky). Divakaruni's interest in women began after she left India, at which point she reevaluated the treatment of women there.

PLOT

The *Mistress of Spices* is a mystical tale told by Tilo, a young Indian woman in an old woman's body who has been trained in the secret powers of spices. Her special knowledge leads her to Oakland, California where she uses it to help the local Indian community by opening a spice shop from which she administers spices as curatives. Tilo can see into people's hearts and minds but it is a mistress's duty to keep herself at a distance, "not too far nor too near, in calm kindness poised." However, Tilo is unable to obey her charge, and she becomes emotionally involved with her customers as they struggle with the demands of their families, the clash of the old way versus the American way, racism, abusive husbands—all of the complexities of living in the modern world. It is also her duty to limit her involvement to the Indian community. But Tilo finds herself mysteriously drawn to an American man named Raven, whose innermost thoughts she cannot read. Her complex and passionate relationships with her customers and Raven are in violation of her spice mistress vows, and so she finds herself forced to choose between the magical of an immortal and the vicissitudes of life in the real

world. Vibrant, vivacious, headstrong and daring, Tilo is unforgettable and so is her story."

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Tilo, proprietress of the Spice Bazaar in Oakland, California, is not the elderly Indian woman she appears to be. Trained as a mistress of spices, she evokes the magical powers of the spices of her homeland to help her customers. These customers, mostly first- or second-generation immigrants, are struggling to adapt their Old World ideals to the unfamiliar and often unkind New World. Though trapped in an old woman's body and forbidden to leave the store, Tilo is unable to keep the required distance from her patrons' lives. Her yearning to join the world of mortals angers the spices, and Tilo must face the dire consequences of her disobedience. Divakaruni, whose conversational style translates well into audio, blends social commentary and romance into an eloquent novel of the human condition.

Nayantara- Star seer: Tilo was born in a village. When she had her birth, the midwife cried over her face and the fortune-teller shook his head sorrowfully at her father. She was named Nayantara, star of the eye. Actually the pity is that her parents' faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child. She was considered a dowry debt. They fed her milk from white ass as her mother was suffering from a fever. She was lonely and wandering the village unattended. Shortly after her birth, it becomes apparent that the girl is special. She can see the distant future with uncanny clarity. True to her name, as she has super-natural powers, she began to foretell what would happen. Her parents consider her as the burden but she has the power to predict the future and her magical powers and fame begins to spread and bring wealth to her and parents.

Bhagyavati- Bringer of luck and death: People from every walk of life praised her and the pirates came to know of her. One day, the pirates assailed and assaulted her village, they indulged in spoliation. The pirates burned down her village. They ambushed men and killed them. They abducted boy children to make the pirates and girl children for evil carnal purpose. This makes her and the other girls shudder with fear. Tilo tries to employ her power to defend the village and

herself but it proves rather ineffective and of no avail. They bind her and carry her away on to their deck of the ship, she is extremely miserable and desolate as she has failed to defend herself and her parents and the village with her magical power. She is said to have failed to make them to take their heels. The pirates' chief named her Bhagyavati, Bringer of luck. She became a Bhagyavati Sorceress; pirate queen, bringer of luck and death. Later on, her days on the deck are painful and harrowing. She happens to espy serpents during the tempestuous and choppy sea. She recounts how she had encountered snakes in her father's house, in fields, in rivers and now in oceans, but all the snakes were benevolent to her. Now on the deck, she is the queen of the Pirates, She remembers that even after she has become the mistress of magical spices in Oakland, She keeps earthen bowls of milk in the far corners of her store for snakes. She holds snakes in awe. She dreads snakes and has surrendered superstitions besides her power of magic.

Tilottama – Life giver: Nayantara finds herself swept up in a life of roughish wandering. She had no real home in India, nor does she have one at sea. After the short period with Pirates, She throws herself in after hearing of a magical island of spices. It was the island of spice. The old one had immense power on the island. Nayantara became a devout disciple of the Old one. She was her favourite. The Old One christened her as Tilottama – the essence of til life giver, 'apsara' of Rain – God Indra's court- most elegant dancers, crest jewel among women. Nayantara, in this manner, came to be known as Tilo, She has several lessons in magic and uses of spices. The Old one has given a stern warning to Tilo that she should never surrender her love to man as Brahma had warned Tilottama to be chief dancer in Indra's court and never give her love to man. But the dancer Tilo had not heeded the warning and was banished to the earth to live a life of illness and age. This warning embodies an invisible warning for Tilo that after choosing to be a mistress of spices and after all the disciples have disappeared in the air, she should not use the magic power and power of spices for her own sake but to serve her customers whoever visits her store. She should not surrender her passion to a mortal man. If she did so, she would

forego her control over not only magic power and spices but dissipate her old and ugly body too.

Magical Powers of Spices: Tilo knows the Spice origin, their colours and their smells. She can call them by their names and feels that the old secrets of the spices have been forgotten now, but it was known to mothers. The Spices of true power are from her birthland, land of ardent poetry, India. Divakaruni treats spices as characters in her novel as they listen and speak to Tilo. They act and react and make Tilo use and not to use their magical powers. Tilo and the other women like her who become mistresses are plopped down around the world in little shops to sell spices. One of the cruel tricks played on the mistresses is that no matter their age, they exist trapped within the body of an aged woman. The Spices do this in order to prevent their mistresses from being tempted by bodily pleasures. In the course of novel, Tilo administers herbs and Spices to the customers who visit her shop- the troubled teenage boy fetching spices for his mother, the young woman whose father forbids her to marry outside her race. When Tilo thinks about Turmeric, Ahuja's wife comes into her store. Her name is Lalita but when Tilo wants to call her by her name, Lalita, She prefers to be called Ahuja's wife. She is from Kanpur and she is married to an Indian boy living in America. She loves to do needle works but she is not allowed to do by her husband. She has child-longing and is suffering from it too. Tilo administers turmeric to her with the words of healing whispered into it. Later, when she doesn't want to lie with her husband, Tilo asks her to take the spice fennel to get mental strength. Tilo uses Spices to help others in difficulties, however when Tilo begins bending the spices to her own will, ignoring what they say she should prescribe, she discovers how quickly the spices can turn their magic against her. When she falls in love with Raven all the magical powers she had from the spices and herbs begin to recede and hollow her bones. The Spice song becomes a receding song.

Maya- Illusion, spell, enchantment: The novel concludes with a strange but significant chapter- the title of which is Maya. She asks Raven to help her find a new name as her Tilo life is over. He names her Maya. It is Tilo's third name. Maya means

illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day. She finds her identity of marrying Raven and abandons the practice of spices.

Tilo, the Mistress of Spices, has many disguises and names that reveal her multiple identities. Tilo was born in a village and she was named Nayan Tara. Then the pirates carry her away and then she is called 'Bhagyavati'. When She decides to reach the island, the snakes named her 'Sarpakanya'. For becoming mistress of Spices, She changed her name into Tilo meaning 'a life giver and a restorer of health and hope'. She has to change her identities many times in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni dealt with themes of identity seeking through her characters. Her novels deal sensitively with struggles of Women and their psychological conflicts. In Mistress of Spices, She adopts a more complex strategy for portraying diasporic identity.

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