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## Diasporic Perspectives in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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### ABSTRACT

Diaspora is the movement or migration of a group of people, who share a common national and ethnic identity and are away from an established or ancestral homeland. Originally, the term 'diaspora' referred to the exile of the Jewish people and Jews living outside ancient or modern day Israel. The first recorded usage of the word "diaspora" in the English language was in 1876 referring to refugees of the Irish famine. The Indian diaspora has come out of the shadows in recent years. Diaspora, a relatively new development in the postcolonial literature remains a favourite topic for investigative literary outputs. Large number of people migrates from India to various alien lands with a dream of a new life which tempts them to go there. Some of them have made a mark in the field of writing. These immigrant writers reflect, on the one hand, their attachment to the motherland and on the other, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness in the host land. The writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has experienced a bonding to her home that is India and its rich heritage which she has time and again mentioned at various times through her works. She writes in a specific genre that is magic realism along with others under her main topic of creative writings. She has delineated upon the working of myths in Indian culture through magic realism from *The Mistress of Spices* to *The Palace of Illusions*. The present research paper focuses on the Diasporic perspectives of the characters and their journey towards destination.

**Key Words:** Diaspora, Home, Identity, Migration, Exile, Magic Realism.

Diaspora describes the historical event of shifting of a community from one land to some another one collectively. During the uncivilized times various people used to migrate from one geographical land to the other. The reasons behind their migrations might have been various but the predominant ones can be the natural disasters or some fatal disease. These earlier beings' migration might be a result of some outer force or a manmade disaster like war to occupy that precious piece of land. Then various civilizations came on the front and this process of migration became faster and much easier. Some moved from their place in search of

livelihood, some to invade and to dominate the native people. One example of such exile can be found in the migration of Jews. Though this term came in prominence much later or it can be termed as a twentieth century phenomena with the cross-country migration but is similarly applicable to the old time's happenings. If we have a look upon the histories of various cultures and countries we may easily found examples of diasporic happenings.

In our country we have more than twenty Five languages and still speaking and understanding two languages Hindi and English. We have twenty nine states and still have one government. We have

cultural dissimilarities and even then celebrate all festivals collectively and with great enthusiasm. We have so many religions and still the country is secular and religious tolerant. In modern times people migrate from one place to another to achieve their ambitions and to fulfill their dreams. Today the needs are economic. Various people try to improve their financial conditions and thus they leave their own countries and migrate to some other country. In such conditions they face a lot of problems because they left their families, their culture, and their identity, everything behind them in their own countries. They carry a cultural bag and baggage along with them. On reaching to that altogether new land they miss that atmosphere but following their needs they also try to assimilate with their new found lands. In this assimilation the migrant has to recreate a new self and destroy something from his old self. Under the term 'Diaspora' we will study all the complications faced by such people. But all the complications related with this term can be summed up in a phrase quest for identity.

The writers of Indian Diaspora have written about various complications faced by them in their works. Chitra Divakaruni Divakaruni is an Indian American writer. She was born in India but later on migrated to America and established there as a professor of Creative Writing program. She has tried her hand in various genres like magic realism, fantasy and many more but basically writes on the backdrop of diasporic tone. In all her novels we find a curious, strange and an apprehended look on the foreign culture. On the other hand she looks back on her own country and culture in a way to investigate, penetrate, interpret and unravel some of its hidden or untouched corners of thought patterns. Her major works include *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2003) and *The Palace of Illusions* (2009). In most of her novels she deals with magic realism but the novel which can be seen totally under the light of this genre is *The Mistress of Spices*.

In *The Palace of Illusions* she has tried to cope up with a creative genre of recreation of the epic *Mahabharata* from the only perspective of Panchaali. She herself has termed it as

"PANCHAALI'S MAHABHARAT", she has made only Draupadi to speak this novel other characters speak only casually. She has done much research to write this epic from altogether new perspective of a female. The main objective of this paper would be, to record and analyze this novel from a diasporic perspective.

In *The Palace of Illusions* also we can find this pattern of Diaspora easily. In this novel Draupadi's birth from fire is the example of her unusual or rather we can call it an enforced exile from the heaven to earth. She before her birth resided in devlok with her brother but on the call of King Darupad they were forced to come. But after entering on the earth she was always treated as an unwanted child. Her father Drupad performed theyagya to have a son who may avenge his insult done by Drona. He got a son with a daughter from the sacred fire but remained an enforced child with a special responsibility because she was professed being able to "change the course of history" (Divakaruni 5). Her nurse tells her the story of her birth from fire many a times on her insistence, "...Dhai Ma puffed out her cheeks at my tendency to drama, calling me the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (Divakaruni 1). Draupadi like an immigrant who has left her home at first got rejected by her new home and its members. Though she doesn't have the nostalgic feelings regarding her lost home land but is very astonishingly fascinated about her new home. Her displacement from heaven and rehabilitation in King Drupad's palace both the events have put some influence on her attitudes towards her life. Now she is a grown up girl but during her childhood she tried hard to assimilate with the ways of living in the palace.

She tries to copy queens who look elegant to her, especially queen Sulochana. When she meets other princesses she feels like a stranger and becomes uncomfortable, "If someone addressed me- a guest or a newcomer, usually, who didn't know who I was- I tended to blush and stammer and (yes, even at this age) trip over the edge of my sari" (Divakaruni 9). She found herself attached only to her brother and to Krishna. She tried to assimilate with this new society by relating her own qualities with others. She relates her brother with herself on

the basis that both of them were born from fire and had a mutual affection for each other. But she has a special friendship with Krishna too due to their similarity of complexion. Where Draupadi felt a tinge of shameful due to her dark complexion, for Krishna his dark complexion works as a magnet. Slowly she starts becoming the centre of attraction due to her beauty. Now her charm and the prophecy started making her an alien in the world of normal or we can say ordinary human beings. She feels:

I began to notice things, though. My maidservants-even those who had been with me for years-kept their distance until summoned. If I asked them anything of a personal nature-how their families were, for instance, or when they were getting married-they grew tongue-tied and escaped from my presence as soon as they could...Even my father was uneasy when he visited me and rarely looked directly into my eyes. I began to wonder whether Dhri's tutor's nervousness at my interruptions had a less flattering cause than my beauty. (Divakaruni 32)

One day when her *siarindhri* was making her hairs another maids were discussing about a sage who tells about future happenings. She becomes curious to test prophecy made by the priests at the time of birth. She pleaded to Dhai Ma and somehow convinced her. She wants to explore the darkest corners of her upcoming life. When the spirits tells her future she becomes shun and regrets the future destruction she would cause. She becomes afraid on the very idea of the destruction and killings of her son's and her brother Dhri. She laments on these prophecies by spirits that she would own one of the wondrous palaces but she would have to lose it soon. She wants to change her destiny because she doesn't want to become the cause of destruction of mankind at such a large scale. The sage gave her a new name Panchaali and suggested her that now onwards she should make others to call her by this name. Though at first instance she becomes confused as well as tensed on the idea of getting married to five husbands and owing a magical palace but later on most of the times she muses over the later one. She always thinks about her new

home and in her dreams craves for it, "...I thought also of the palace the spirits had promised me. Most magical, they'd called it. I wondered how I would ever gain such a palace" (Divakaruni 42). She has started imagining about her future palace after her nurse has informed her that every girl has to leave her father's house and go to her husband' one. She finds various unsatisfying things in her father's palace. She contemplates:

I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of color and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies flirting among jasmines, and in the midst of it...Would it be elegant as crystal? Solidly precious, like a jewel-studded goblet? Delicate and intricate, like gold filigree? I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home. (Divakaruni 7)

For her, her own palace would be her real home. She got enthralled on knowing that in her honor a *swayamvar* would be organized and in that ceremony she would be able to choose her husband. She rejoiced on the idea of being in love with any one of the great warriors and then selecting him as her spouse. But all her dreams and imaginations altogether got shattered when asked to choose Arjun as her husband from the group of warriors. Now she feels as, "My mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a wormdangled at the end of a fishing pole" (Divakaruni 57). She feels cheated on the behalf that her marriage ceremony would be a process to strengthen her father's political situation. If she would marry Arjun only then Drupad would be able to fight against Drona. She has found some similarities between herself and Karna on the bases of strange births of both of them. She is fascinated towards him more than anyone else, even more than Arjun. She longed for him but under the spell of Krishna's words she abused Karna in the assembly of the kings but later on she regretted her doings. She put the garland into Arjuna's neck and started her journey with him. On the way to his home in jungle she realizes, "An insidious voice inside me said, Karna would never have let you suffer like this" (Divakaruni 99). Thus her second displacement has

occurred with or without her wish doesn't matter. And with this one her problems increased by a great number.

Her mother-in-law Kunti has not allowed her to find love for herself in Arjuna alone. The first thing she said to her son is to share her between the brothers that disturbed everything. She considers Kunti, "A woman like her would never tolerate anyone who might lure her sons away" (Divakaruni 108). In a way she has stopped her from dividing her sons. Her husbands marry her one by one and shared her in a way that her chastity can't be questioned. Now she all times longed for her would be palace. She thinks, "Often I imagined my own palace, the one I would build someday" (Divakaruni 113). After her marriage she felt her life has totally changed with her five husbands as she meditates over, "I couldn't quite believe what a transformation my life had undergone-or that I had helped to bring about this new destiny we were living" (Divakaruni 139). Earlier she thought that she would be married happily and would live her life joyfully but all her hopes vanished with time as she didn't get any satisfaction from her marriages. Even after marrying five males she remained an outsider as the Pandavas didn't share their pains with her or before her with their mother. They behave in very strange manner, that made her ponder, "Did the massacre at Khandav Forest torment him? I would never know. Though they must have disagreed with each other from time to time, my husbands never revealed their dissension to outsiders. (And in this matter, I was still an outsider.) Kunti had trained them well" (Divakaruni 143). Thus her fascination for husbands diverted to three other places, One is her would be palace, Krishna and Karna. Krishna suggests her not to relate herself with the palace but she refuses. He reflects, "Don't be so attached to what is, after all. No more than stone and metal and asura sleight of hand. All things in this world change and pass away-some after many years, some overnight. Appreciate the Palace of Illusions, by all means. But if you identify so deeply with it, you set yourself up for sorrow" (Divakaruni 149). Other than her Palace of Illusions she also craves for Karna and his looks on her. But he gives her due respect and nothing else.

Her arrogance makes her fall prey to a huge trap. She pokes fun at Duryodhana when he falls in the illusory pond which looked like a carpet to him. She laughed on this incident and satirized him by calling him Blind's son is blind. This staunch remark invokes a fire of revenge in Duryodhan's heart. This instance conditioned all the miss happenings that happened with Draupadi later on. She visited Inderprastha with her husbands and her mother-in-law, totally unaware of the things that would shape her future. She is stripped before the whole assembly due her husbands' defeat of themselves and their wife as a slave. After her this disgrace they were forced to go on exile in forest. She recorded all her humiliations into her heart for the whole period of her exile. During her exile she never forgot that disgrace and never allowed her husbands to forget it. She always instigated feelings of revenge in them as:

Each day as I served their meals, I reminded the pandavas of how they'd failed me, and what I'd suffered as a result in Duryodhan's sabha. Each night I recited the taunts of the Kauravas so that they stayed fresh in their minds. When we blew out our lamps, I tossed and turned on my bed, the rushes suddenly as hard as sticks, recalling Karna's face,...Each dawn when I arose, sweaty with restlessness, I pictured our revenge: a fire-strewn battlefield, the air grim with vultures, the mangled bodies of the Kauravas and their allies-the way I would transform history. (Divakaruni 199)

The revenge she has craved for years finally came in the shape of Battle of Kurukshetra and a huge bloodshed occurred. No doubt she would be blamed for it but for her only this retribution may fetch a feeling of satisfaction. But after Karna's death the sensations of satisfaction started fading away. She started realizing a relinquished feeling, "Part was relieved that my husband had won, that he was safe. Part realized that we were now very close to achieving the vengeance I'd craved-though it gave me no satisfaction" (Divakaruni 297). She after his death had not remained as interested in the war as she was earlier than this one. Now she waits for the time when it would be over. At last when all her

sons and her brother die at last she held herself responsible for the destruction that is caused by her vengeance. Even Pandavas feel cheated even after winning the battle. They feel looted and devoured of everything as they have no one from their family to enjoy their victory except Krishna and Draupadi. Though they have their successor Parikshit, who would carry their names further but the space they have created cannot be occupied by anyone. They felt as if they have become losers even after winning the Battle. At last even Panchaali regretted the ends of her life as:

I consider my life. What was it that made me joyful? What made me experience peace? ... I'd ridden all these years, delighted one moment, distraught the next. Certainly none of the men or women I'd been close to had given me that type of joy- nor I them, if I were to admit the truth. Even my palace with its strange and beautiful fantasies, the palace that in some way I'd loved more than any of my husbands, the palace that was my greatest pride, had ultimately brought me only sorrow. (Divakaruni 352)

For all her life she has craved for eternal love in her various relationships and even in material objects but she never find it. For her, the feeling of being at home was always related to being in deep love and affection with someone which she never attained by any means. She thought that satisfaction could be achieved by having the passions, objects or partners of your own choice, now which proved to be wrong to her. At last even her infatuations Karan faded away and those passions for him seemed to her fugitive and transitive. But the love for Krishna which she realized on her death bed was and is eternal. She felt a strong bond with him and felt a sort of resting situation under his touch. She acknowledges through her imagination:

He loved me even when I behaved in a most unloved manner. And his love was totally different from every other in my life. Unlike them, it didn't expect me to behave in a certain way. It didn't change into displeasure or anger or even hatred if I didn't comply. It healed me. If what I felt for

Karna was a cingeing fire, Krishna's love was a balm, moonlight over a parched landscape. How blind I'd been not to recognize it for the precious gift it was! (Divakaruni 356)

She questions his existence and asks again and again if he's divine. And if he is then how can she be in love with a divine personality because she has always thought herself a very ordinary person devoid of any divinity in herself. After living her mortal body she feels as a divine being and so in a loving relationship with Krishna at last. And it is in him that she also finds herself as a true Panchaali and her beloved Karna whom she couldn't find on earth. She responds:

Krishana touches my hand. If you can call it a hand, these pinpricks of light that are newly coalescing into the shape of fingers and palm. At his touch something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below. I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable- but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali. I reach with my other hand for Karna-how surprisingly solid his clsp! Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its centre everywhere. We rise; the shapes cluster around us in welcome, dissolving and forming and dissolving again like fireflies in a summer evening. (Divakaruni 360)

Thus like a person on his journey in search of his home she finally finds it with Krishna in shape of Karna and a palace which is made up of infinity and eternal things. It is a similar blending of process called Diaspora in recent times, as William Safran has given three key words to describe the whole process. He has said that a person who can be said on an exile from his homeland undergoes through three main processes: displacement, homelessness and return to that homeland. Distance and dislocation has provided Divakaruni a new insight to see through the heart of society she has left behind and the epic is retold and with a new vision making

the national and cultural boundary extended by memory.

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