



Portrayal of Diasporic Sensibility in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

The word 'diaspora' is widespread in every field. It is popularly used in academic, journalistic and political field. Earlier the word had a specific meaning referring to the dispersal and exile of the Jews but in the previous century the meaning of the term has been changed due to many reasons. It is not restricted only to the Jews. Nowadays it is generally used for migration of almost every kind. It is popularly known as the dispossessed and displaced community in different cultural setup. This community plays very powerful role in asserting its identity in various ways. Many Indian writers have given very true and authentic depiction to these communities. Some Indian writers settled in abroad and hence they became the part of this community. Such writers felt the real problems and various issues of such communities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is such a writer. She has felt the various issues of the diaspora community such as loneliness, rootlessness, hybridity, alienation and identity crisis. Diaspora sensibility happens when the characters from these communities feel various difficulties in the foreign land. They feel the sense of loneliness and alienation. They face various problems and try to change themselves according to the current trends in that land. This process leads them to change their identity and also form their new identity. Thus, they become hybrid in various ways. However, they do not cut themselves from their own motherland. This is the time when they strongly feel connected with the people of their country. Their sense of yearning for their culture, tradition, religions and languages give birth to diasporic literature. Thus, in the diasporic literature we find very dynamic negotiations between two different cultures, two customs and two different set up. This creates the diasporic sensibility in the mind of the characters of the diaspora community.

The aim of the present paper is to find out the diasporic sensibility of the characters of diaspora community in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Keywords- Diaspora, sensibility, loneliness, hybridity, identity crisis, dislocation, community.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the most popular writer of the diasporic fiction in the modern age. She has written many novels in which she has presented various immigrant characters with minute details. Among her novels, most famous novels are *Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Oleander Girl*, *The Forest of Enchantments* and *Palace of Illusions*. With all these novels, she has enriched the Indian literature with the diasporic writing. She herself left India for America and settled there. The word 'diaspora' comes from the Greek language which means scattering and dispersion of people from their original home land to another land. Thus, this literature deals with the people of migration and their struggles in the foreign country in various ways. In the colonial and postcolonial periods, many Indians have settled in many countries abroad. The writing of such people has been named as diaspora writing. Indians leave their country for the Western parts of the world for better prospects in education, business and for good job opportunities. But it doesn't mean that they completely forget their own motherland. In fact, leaving their own country casts much attraction to their mind and they become nostalgic about their motherland. They cannot forget the influence of their customs, traditions, their ways of life style and many other habits. They become the subject matter for the diaspora writers. The writers of the Indian diaspora beautifully present the problems faced by such people. The major themes of diaspora writing are dislocation, rootlessness, alienation, negotiations with past and present, identity crisis and many more. The diaspora literature presents the new paradigm to map the cross-cultural impact in alien culture. Some popular women novelists shine like bright stars in the

field of this writing. They are Bharti Mukherjee, Monica Ali, Geeta Mehta, Anita Desai, Meena Alexander, Kiran Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and many more. These novelists have depicted and highlighted the problems of migrants' community along with their various other shades of problems. Salman Rushdie writes about Indian diaspora, "writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates are hunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being muted into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge..... which gives rise to profound uncertainties that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will in short, create fictions, not action or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of the mind." (Rushdie, Salman). Diaspora people are generally found in minority and these people are strongly connected to their past and ethnicity. They experience very painful condition of exile and are always in search of third space. Edward Said observes this terrible experience in his book '*Culture and Imperialism*', "Exile is strangely compelling to think about terrible experience an inhalable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. It's essential sadness can never be surmounted." (Edward Said).

The life of the diaspora community is not very easy. It is very complex and ambiguous. It is full of difficulties and complications, that lead to homogenization. This condition of the diaspora community is exactly explained by Bhikhu Parekh in his lecture- '*Some Reflections on the Indian Diaspora*', "The Indian diaspora is one of the most varied experiences representing half

a dozen religions..... seven different regions of India.....nearly a dozen castes." Here Parekh reflects the adjustability of the Indians, who are generally involved in the double act of migration. The concept of homelessness is reversed by the immigrants' sense of solidarity. Parekh makes it clear by adding some points to his statement. He gives the authentic and true meaning of life and literature in his journal 'Contemporary Thoughts'- "The status of diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots being homeless, he has several homes and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world. Yet this multiplicity of 'home' does not bridge the gap between 'home', the culture of origin and the 'world', the culture of adoption, therefore life of migrants results in alienation and conflicting situation in the target land." (1997:106). Indian immigrants experience themselves in rootless condition. Their motherland becomes invisible and frozen. It is very difficult for themselves to forget the past of their native country and to grow in the adopted land. This condition splits their personality and they become hybrid. They try to grapple both. Unhappiness, uneasiness and discontent are clearly seen in the migrants due to many reasons such as- problems of adoption, different culture, alienation and identity crisis. Vijay Mishra observes this condition in his article, 'Literature of Indian Diaspora ', "All diasporas are unhappy but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to the people, who want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps do not press the hyphen for fear that this would lead to massive schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an epitome of real or imagined displacements. With self-imposed sense of exile, they are hunted by specters....Diasporas are fluid ideal social formations happy to live wherever they can." (Mishra, Vijay). People of this community face very difficult conditions in the alien land. They face cultural encounters, economic problems and problems of language. The literature

written by diaspora writers capture all these upheavals of their life. Stuart Hall in his book 'Minimal Selves in Houston' defines diaspora condition as, "Migration is one way trip, and there is no 'home' to go back to"(Hall, Stuart). In the novels of Divakaruni, immigrant characters struggle for existence and for their identity. Her characters face cultural dilemmas and complexities of life. Divakaruni highlights the elements of the diasporic identity and sensibility in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* through the character Tilo. She adopts more complex strategies for highlighting diasporic sensibility in the novel. Through the character of Tilottama or Tilo, the novelist has raised the problems of immigrant women. Tilo is a woman who is migrated to Oakland, California and she runs a Spice Bazaar. She acquires some magical powers and uses them to cure the disease of human beings. She cures with those magical powers the psychological and physical disorders. Tilo respects her culture that is why she wears the Indian attire. She is an Indian woman yet she has created her own identity at the place where she lives. Here in the novel, the novelist has adopted the first-person narrative from the perspective of the heroine of the novel Tilottama who has become expert in extracting the essence of various spices and making use of them in order to alleviate the pain, suffering and disorders of the people. She also gives the solution of various problems of the people. She is called the mistress of spices. The novel is a dazzling tale of dreams and desire. As Ami Tan writes about the novel, "A dazzling tale of misbegotten dreams and desires weaved with poetry and story teller magic." (Divakaruni Chitra). In the novel, the writer has woven beautifully myth, magic and reality for unique purposes. Myth and magic are used as an objective correlative for the feelings of Tilo who is not a simple character but bears the mythological and magical traits in her. She is the owner of a grocery store in Oakland, California where she has created a Mini-India of itself. One of the central themes of the novel is the solution of all the problems and if anyone thinks over the

theme, it becomes at one relevant for the modern man in modern times. Every person wants the solution of their problems whether the problems are temporary or permanent. Thus, modern time dilemma gets a proper place and fair treatment in this novel and the dilemma is an allegory of the immigrant people who experience the dual pull of the charm of the past and the call of the present.

The novel highlights the elements of myth and supernatural powers in a very amazing way. As it is generally believed that supernatural powers are connected to the hearts of women rather than men. In the novel, the protagonist is gifted with the power of predicting the other person problems exactly and she knows deeply what any person thinks at their heart. She has magical powers in penetrating the hearts of others and giving them the best solutions to their problems. She is the mistress of spices and spices sing in her hand. India is the country of spices so the word spices add flavour and it reminds of Indian culture. Spices are not only the food items but they are part of our cultural heritage. They give a dynamic status to our culture. It is clearly given in the novel in these lines, "I am turmeric whose rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the nectar and before the poison and thus lie in between." (*The Mistress of Spices*, 13). Tilo is very humane in treating the people of their various problems. She uses spices as a remedy for them especially for Indian immigrants in curing their wounds and their social disorders like alienation and their aloofness. She is called the life giver, hurts healer and hope nurture. She is not presented by the novelist as the rebellious woman of the society who rebels against any type of wrongdoings. She is not a stereotyped Indian woman who raises her voice against the value systems of the patriarchal society. In the novel, we see her around the people who come to her to share their problems of all types and share their immigrant experiences and she gives

remedy to all these complexities. Tilo affirms - "All these voices, Hindi, Oriya, Assamese, Urdu, Tamil, English layered one on the other like notes from a tanpura, all those voices asking more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where. and so I must listen to the spaces between, must know weigh them in my coral-boned hand." (*The Mistress of Spices*, 78). Here in the above lines the novelist has given the references of all the Indian languages which remind us of the great cultural heritage of our Indian country. India is known for its variety and diversity. Here the reference of languages clearly reflects the unity in diversity and variety. Tanpura is an Indian musical instrument and by using this instrument, the novelist has presented the legacy of our Indian culture. She has presented the aesthetic value system of our country. Tanpura is here not presented only as an instrument but it deeply reflects the psyche of the immigrants' soul. It captures the deep-rooted sentiment and feelings of not only Indians settled in foreign land as immigrants but also it gives and pictures the various shades of pain of modernization which has provided a very shallow life to the people. Thus, India and Indian culture keep on peeping across the boundaries. The presence of Indianness and Indian culture through various modes is the affirmation and representation of diasporic sensibility. The role of women in a family and in a society shows the Indian cultural value system. Generally, a woman knows the requirements of all the members in a family and it creates a familial value system which is the basic part of our Indian culture. Just in the same way in this novel, Tilo knows the requirements of her visitors to her shop. This gives the impression of the shop as a home and this pictures as an Indian home. Such type of interpretation of activity in the shop of the Tilo imparts the cultural setup of India in the mind of the immigrants. In this way the novelist has portrayed the opaque nature of national borders in the minds of the immigrants. Tilo is a very generous woman who always thinks about

Indians living in America. For the novelist, the pain and suffering of diasporic life is very complex. Diaspora naturally touches the issue of racialism. Jagjit is a character in the novel who is a Sikh and he always visits the shop of Tilo with his mother. Jagjit is a very timid child in the school and is scolded and abused for not knowing English. He becomes alone and he is harassed and tortured on the basis of racialism. He does not belong to the land of whites. He is scolded as- "Talk English son of bitch. Speak up nigger wet back asshole." (*The Mistress of Spices*, 39). Tilo here becomes the supporter of him and boosts his confidence. This is the case of racialism generally faced by the immigrant people on the foreign land. At the end of the novel, Jagjit becomes a different body with the help of Tilo. In the Novel, Tilo's shop becomes the centre of gathering for the immigrant people. Galaxy of immigrant characters throng around the spice store in Oakland, where we find various characters coming from different parts of the country of India and claiming their identity in spite of their being related to different strata of society comprising rich, middle and poor class. In this setup of different class of society working class people find themselves unable to adjust and sustain in a totally different new culture with their native identity. All the immigrant characters try their best to cope with the problems of the new environment. The immigrants are incapable in sustaining their identity in that new cultural land. They feel cultural dispossession and material acquisition. This situation is graphically portrayed by the novelist. Here Tilo's observation about the rich woman immigrant is remarkable- "Rich woman thank you for reminding me. Beneath the shiniest armour, gold-plated or diamond, the beat of the vulnerable." (*The Mistress of Spices*, 77).

There is another story which tells the painful narrative of Mrs. Ahuja. She lived a very happy and comfortable life at her father's home but unfortunately, she is married to a man who is an alcoholic and her marriage life is not very

easy as she is mistreated by her husband. He always abuses her. She feels alone even in the company of her husband. See here the condition of her which she shares with the protagonist of the novel Tilo- "It is not right that a woman should say such things about her man; all day at home is so lonely, the silence like quick sand sucking at her wrists and ankles, tears she cannot stop, disobedient tears like spilled pomegranate seeds, and Ahuja shouting when he returns home to her swollen eyes." (*The Mistress of Spices*, 15). Here the story of Mrs. Ahuja appears with two different shades, one is of diasporic sensibility and other is of feminine sensibility. This story clearly tells the pathetic tale of Indian women who are victimised in their own family through conditioning and how they are unable to cross the barriers which they create in their own mind. Here in this tough condition Tilo helps her and after that she becomes Lalita by throwing those tyrannical structures that have made her weak and give her pain and suffering. She leaves the house of her husband and starts a fresh life.

Tilo always helps Indian immigrants to solve their problems to make their identity intact. There is another story of Geeta to whom the mistress gives several spices. She gives her fenugreek for healing breaks, ginger for deeper courage and amchur for taking the right decision. Geeta is a young woman who has been given freedom by her parents. She loves a foreigner named Juan but her parents are not allowing her for the marriage. In the family of Geeta, we find a conflict between two generations-old and new. Her grandfather is an orthodox person and hence he doesn't give her his approval for marriage. Here in the story of Geeta, again we see the Indian mindset of the parents who give their daughters every opportunity and freedom but not the opportunity to select her boyfriend as life-partner. D. B. Gavani rightly comments- "For the second generation Indian like Geeta, the question about identity is differently poised. She challenges continuous identification with

patriarchal traditions which she associates with her grandfather. Tilo empathizes with Geeta, tries to assuage their pain and the novel tells us that she succeeds in restoring peace and harmony within the family." (p. 79). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reflects diasporic sensibility throughout the novel. She enhances the Indian glory as well as portrays the difficult problems of the immigrants. The novel is full of the magical realism of the East, with Indian beauty of spices and their magic. America is a multicultural nation where immigrant characters find themselves caught between cultures. They try to maintain their own culture as well as adopting the other one. Many characters of the novel like Lalita, Jagjit, Geeta and Haroun are striving for their identity. Through her futuristic vision, the novelist has portrayed the gallery of immigrant characters giving them their identity, security and dignity in the foreign land. The novelist has presented the feeling of alienation, dislocation, hybridity and many other issues related to diasporic sensibility. She beautifully examines the question of identity of her characters. This novel is the reflection of the writer's own diasporic sensibility which opens the window for analysing the immigrant characters on various grounds. *Tilottama* is the outstanding creation of Divakaruni and the novelist has given artistic treatment to this character for highlighting various issues of the immigrants. In this way the novelist has highlighted the awareness of the characters towards various problems generating due to their being immigrants. Ultimately the above analysis of the novel clearly affirms that the novel *The Mistress of Spices* is a profound exploration of diasporic sensibility.

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