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CULTURE AND CONFLICT IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
THE MISTRESS OF SPICES

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Abstract

This paper "Cultural Conflict in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*" attempts to analyze cultural conflict as a core theme of the novel. The novel brings out the protagonist's encounter with two contrasting cultures. It discusses the round characters' alienation and identity crisis in a foreign land. It addresses the importance of overcoming conflicts over suppression and suffering. This paper attempts to explore the conflicts of immigrants.

Keywords: Culture, Conflict, Hybridity, Identity, Migrants, Marginalization.

Introduction

"Cultural differences should not separate us from each other, but rather cultural diversity brings a collective strength that can benefit all of humanity" says Robert Alan, novelist and screenwriter. So, culture is a significant part of society and humanity. It is also an identity and legacy of history. Every community has its own culture and tradition. Zimmermann's article says that "Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts." At times, culture and tradition creates chaos among communities because of intolerance. Cultural differences made some migrants to reject their own cultural roots.

During the postcolonial period, eastern migrants faced cultural conflicts in foreign land. Diasporic writing was and still is one of the popular

themes in postcolonial literature. It reflects migrants' hybridity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the most suggestible and non-omittable writer among diasporic literature. Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is an explicable diasporic novel. This masterpiece highlights the conflicts of immigrants in western countries, especially, the US. It inscribes the rich heritage of Indian culture through the meaningful uses of spices. It replicates the Indian essence in every character of the novel, especially the protagonist Tilo. Culture is vividly focused as a central theme in *The Mistress of Spices*. The conflict of culture is critically analysed in this paper.

Conflicts in The Mistress of Spices

The Mistress of Spices depicts the desires and dreams of Indian migrants in the United States. The novel records the novelist personal experiences as an immigrant. So Chaturvedi quotes that "a central motif in the mosaic of American society. Her

objective is to deconstruct myths and stereotypes. She hopes to dissolve through her writing boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and worlds" (Chadurvedi 56). Divakaruni has infused the conflicts confronted by non-native people around the western countries.

Tilo, the mistress of spices beholds the magical powers of Indian spices. She often speaks to them and listens to them. She owns a shop "Spice Bazaar", where she meets her customers who happened to be Indians. As Tilo has the magical power, she is able to find the perfect spice to heal the customer's angst and agony. She knows everyone's internal and external sufferings through the magical power. In the novel, she helps those characters with spices who come to her shop.

The readers find out the conflicts through Tilo's point of view. Different characters in the novel come across different types of conflicts as immigrants. Haroun a young Indian in California desired American dreams frequently visits Tilo's shop to know fortune telling. He struggles to root a life with native people and confronts physical assault for being an Indian. He ends driving a taxi while he wants to work for a company. He is mentally stagnated with his past and pushing himself to overcome internal conflict. Divakaruni says that in the conflict of fate and destiny, Haroun longs for having "Riches and happiness and may be even love, a beautiful woman with dark lotus-flower eyes" (TMOS 27-28). She portrays him as a victim of inner conflict.

Lalita is often identified as "Ahuja's wife" not as "Lalita". She leads an unhappy married life as an immigrant. She wanted an identity, secured life and, a baby to define her life. In Panda's article, the state of Lalita is stated as "Lalita is trapped with Ahuja as a being 'double exiled.' Lalita characterizes the numerous Indian wives who are marginalized in their own families in the alien land of America. Furthermore, Ahuja's attempt to rape his wife siezes any opportunity for Lalita to accept him as her husband. Lalita resists in vain. Wifehood denied to her, Lalita craves to realize her womanhood as a mother. Her dream of becoming a mother is

shattered due to her husband's impotence; this shatters Lalita's ultimate dream of becoming a mother." After all these obstacles, she gains self-respect and dignity.

Another character Jagjit a Punjabi teenager who is shy and feels inferior among Americans. Through this character, Divakaruni encounters her real life events as quoted by Uma Girish as "It happened in 1976 when Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni was all of 19. Walking down a Chicago street with some relatives she was appalled when a few white teenagers yelled "nigger" and hurled slush at her. The incident, deeply shaming, was never discussed, but it stayed and played in her mind and acted as the spur to kick start her writing." Similar to the above incident Jagjit faces racial conflict through the behaviour his fellow mates. They address him with awful words and treat him in a disgraceful way. To overcome these challenges, he changes his name as "Jag" and adopts a new culture to mingle with mainstream citizens. As a small boy he undergoes racial conflict in this novel and he stands out to show that the new generation is ready to adopt a new culture and also to reject own culture and traditions.

In the novel *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni brings out many subaltern themes like conflicts, identity crisis, marginalization, cultural clashes, race, community and hybridity. In addition, Tilo confronts cultural conflict but however settles down by accepting it. Through Tilo, the novelist reflects the condition of Indian immigrants in western land. Tilo's experience of cultural conflict will be disused in the following.

Tilo as a victim of cultural conflict

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo is the priestess of spices who possesses magical power over spices and an expert in telling fortunes. Initially, Tilo was named Nayan Tara by her parents. When she was born, she was gifted with the enchanting power of finding lost objects and predicting forthcoming risks. This magical power leads of lots of loss to her so out of hope and rage, she falls into the ocean. Later she was found on the shore of Spices Island, where the First Mother names her Tilo after Sesame seeds. She turns spices powerful to assist her clients to overcome troubles and challenges. She

also treats their homesickness, alienation, and ill treatment in new a place through her spices. She lives to abide by the rules given by the First Mother of spices.

Whenever Tilo thinks of Raven, a native American, and her craving desire for love, the spices would warn her and suggests an antidote for love. Though Tilo was faithful towards her duty, the spices sometimes act like the master of the mistress. She remained a slave for half of her life. She wanders between the responsibility towards Spices and her desire towards Raven. Tilo has been trapped between spiritual and emotional worlds which is evident for twisted and toxic state of mind in an alien country. She was seeking the choice of becoming a common lady to live in Raven. Meanwhile, she couldn't choose over the magical spice. Tilo was stagnated with the warning of First Mother, as she says "Don't let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don't rouse the spices' hate" (TMOS 140). She is torn between internal (magic power of spices) and external conflict (craving for carnal desire).

Being an expert with enchanting power she served her village and laboured for pirates. Later, then ended as a mistress of spices and much later when the story sets in she wants to become a native person. To explain the conflict of Identity through different journeys of Tilo, Tomlinson's article says that "Identity is also closely related to the term self. Tilo has been addressed by nearly four different names representing four conflicting and confusing identities in a single lifetime. She remains an enigma both for the readers and herself. Her truth and identity are multi-layered just like the spices whose potential unfolds and posits a number of possibilities. Similarly, Divakaruni suggests the idea of being reborn every time after the symbolic death of her protagonist's previous identity just like the mythical bird phoenix which is reborn out of its own ashes".

She encounters marginalized identity when a mainstream customer comes in and treats her unpleasantly. Tilo never gives up her culture meanwhile wants to embrace a new culture. She commits self-sacrifice into Sampati fire as a

punishment for breaking mistress rules. But the spices forgive Tilo and says, "Mistress who was, when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it, that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer, you did not need to undergo that suffering in the body also" (TMOS 305). In the novel, Tilo confronts cultural hybridity against cultural conflict when asks, "What kind of name do you want" (TMOS 337) Tilo replies, "One that spans my land and yours, India and America for I belong to both" (TMOS 337). They both share the same kind of conflicts as they belong to a different marginalized community, the reality of immigrants' life in western countries.

Conclusion

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni inscribes the conflict of cultural clash in an alien land. The novel explains the trauma faced by the immigrants of the East. The novel indirectly says that Indians are inside their homeland of four walls i.e. Tradition, Culture, Community, and Identity. Like a square peg in a round hole, few eastern immigrants are living in western land with emotional and physical conflicts. Despite the conflicts, the characters end up embracing transformed identity in a new land with hope and love.

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