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A Feminist Reconsideration in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

Ms. Sripriya¹, Ms. K. Vimaladevi²

1. Researcher, Department of English, Kamban College of Arts and Science for Women, Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kamban College of Arts and Science for Women, Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has established herself among the leading writers of Indian heritage writing in English. Everything she writes about is India. Though born in India for Divakaruni, local, at present, is America that is why she has been telling the stories of Indian immigrant women trying to be accommodated and assimilated in the free socio-cultural environment of America. Women portrayed by her are exploited, subjugated and marginalized due to the dominance of male. These women have experienced the brunt of the sufferings if they cross the magical circle drawn around them by their home-culture. Her women struggle to create their own identity out of their immigrant existence. The hardship of the life of these women, while fighting against the established order of society and shattering experiences of womanhood, woman's subordinate status, class conflicts, social censorship, gender

discrimination and the burning problem of female feticide and financial issues like dowry system have been explored from woman's standpoint. The present study attempts to make comprehensive critical comments on the selected works of Divakaruni with an emphasis on feminine experience. It aims to evaluate her selected works and the versatile personality of Divakaruni. Divakaruni's protagonists are the victims of conventional societies that does not allow woman to have freedom and independence. Her writing consists of woman in search of identity, freedom and independence. The novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) has been selected for this purpose.

Keywords

Immigrant; Subjugated; and Feticide.

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Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a Bengali woman, belongs to post-independent group of Indian writers who have been writing in English. Divakaruni was born in Calcutta on 29th July 1956. She grew up in New Alipore in Calcutta, and spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. Her father Rajendra Kumar Banerjee was an accountant by profession and her mother Tatini Banerjee was a schoolteacher. Chitra was the only girl child among the four children. Divakaruni has established herself as a distinct, talented and extraordinary South Asian women writer. She is one of those writers who have spent much of their life outside India, in one of the western countries. Some part of her writing is autobiographical in nature as it deals with her personal experiences in India and America. Her works primarily deal with the experiences of the immigrant women from the feminine standpoint. Divakaruni has published in more than fifty magazines which include Atlantic Monthly and New Yorker. Her writing has been included in several Asian American anthologies such as Best American Short Stories and The Pushcart Prize Anthology. Her works have been translated into eleven languages

including Dutch, Hebrew, Portuguese, Danish, German and Japanese. Divakaruni's first novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is written with a blend of mystery and reality. Its protagonist Tilo (Tilottama) is the mistress of spices. Tilo possesses the supernatural power with the help of which she helps people to overcome their difficulties.

Feminine Responsiveness in *The Mistress Of Spices*

Divakaruni has written *The Mistress of Spices* with an intention to explore the lives of female immigrants in America. In the novel, Divakaruni throws light on the confusion, fear and struggles in the lives of immigrants. She believes that the writers have a social responsibility. That is why they should express the social realities. She views immigrant people as a community (minor) and hence she considers it important to focus. Geeta's story highlights the theme of immigration more strikingly because of its various aspects. Geeta is second generation Indian immigrant woman, a young educated girl living in America with her parents. Her grandpa also lives with them. In her family there are three generations of the immigrant Indians and each of them views India and America from different points of view. Her grandpa does not know much except India. He feels proud to be an Indian and is proud of its rich cultural heritage. Geeta's father is in dilemma. Whether he should belong to India or should accept the American ways of living is a problem for him.

Geeta is born in America and knows nothing about India and Indian culture. Thus, there is huge gap between the psyches of all of them which results in troubles and sufferings. According to grandpa, Geeta's ideas are never appropriate for an Indian girl. He is worried about Geeta's marriage since she has become young. He has frequently warned his son for that. His existence in America does not prevent him from thinking like Indians. According to people like grandpa girls should be controlled. They should be raised up like woman only. Some conservative Indians think that the constant reminder, occasional slapping or scolding can make their children 'Indian'.

Geeta's spending too much money is beyond understanding of Grandpa. His objection for Geeta's stylish American haircut and excessive use of cosmetics is incomprehensible to Geeta for being born and brought up in America. She is unable to understand the Indian mindset but his son can understand this.

For first generation Indian immigrants, marriage has to be arranged by the elders and love marriage is equal to sin. Thus they cannot accept that liberated American culture. Mohan was left to suffer with broken body, and Veena, with shattered heart. Veena has to call their Indian neighbours to tie Mohan to the bed if he gets excited and violent. After some days their neighbours contributed to manage the tickets to send them back to India.

The act of perceiving oneself and the conflict between one's pure self and the perception of the self-influenced by others is one of the foundations of the novel. In Tilo's case, this conflict is seen between her pure self-perception and her perception of self which is again influenced by the Indians, and more probably, by Raven, her American lover. This conflict in the self-perception and the perception of self-influenced by others often results in trouble for Indian immigrant women.

At every stage of her life, Tilo is forced into a space between her past and future without the knowledge of her present. The same is applicable to every female immigrant, who is taken off from her past with a wish to have better future and is thrown into an alien land with uncertain present. The island is the first diasporic space into which Tilo enters and it resembles America. But the island exudes femininity specifically.

While living on the island, Tilo cannot depart from her past. It always streams into her present in the form of her memories of first mother or the other mistresses. Tilo's past affects her growing relationship with Raven, her American lover. Tilo's journey is in itself a redefinition of the self and is an

extension of the conflict that the Indian women face in establishing their identity as an individual.

Tilo also has to struggle due to the contrast between her perception of self and that influenced by others, which is part and parcel of Indian woman's life. The conflicts that she must resolve between her real, youthful, inner self, which reaches out to the world and life outside, and her outer, aged powerful self, which keeps her within strictly imposed limits, are the reworking of the very same conflicts that all exiles experience – between past and future, and the here and the their behaviour at the store, she represents the traditional submissive Indian woman and she is perceived to be so by the perception of others. However, her sense of passion and her ability to seduce are clearly evident in her relationship with Raven.

By recreating the life of Indian immigrant living in America Divakaruni attempts to recreate Indian culture and tradition which is alive among Indian immigrant people similarly she also focuses the status of Indian immigrant women. Through this novel, Divakaruni has commented on several issues regarding the lives of immigrant women. Divakaruni asserts that immigration has different meaning to the female category than their male counterparts, because it brings to them even greater responsibilities along with the opportunities.

After immigration, a woman has to struggle at various levels; at personal level as well as at social level. Indian woman attempts to maintain her dual pattern of behaviour. She tries to create her own cultural identity while she tries to accommodate herself among highly race conscious people. At the same time she has to maintain her Indianness within her house. She has to face the transformation going on within herself that often results in troubles and thus causes crisis in their lives.

Divakaruni seems to be realistic in nature and quite frank while expressing her opinions regarding the lives of women through *The Mistress*

Spices. Thus while facing the racism and the status of being alienated, Divakaruni has a lot to express through her works. The troubles of immigrant women are well defined at two separate levels i.e. at the working place at the hands of Americans and in the house by the male dominated mentality.

The attempts of Indian women to maintain their dual identity is exposed in her works. Their attempts to create their individual identity as it is viewed by themselves and as it is influenced by other people's opinions about them, are acutely pictured by Divakaruni. An Indian immigrant women like Tilo has to face the tragic aspects of racism and sufferings at the hands of their male dominated husbands and households. Hameeda and Lalita, the female characters from *The Mistress Spices* have systematically suppressed every aspect of their personalities which refuses to fit into their images as wives.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, the mistress of spices gives appropriate spices to the people and helps them to overcome their troubles. However, the problem arises when she gets involved with an American and must make a choice; whether she should continue serving her people or look for her own happiness. People coming to her are in trouble either because of being immigrant or they are haunted by the homeland and its culture. For example, Ahuja's wife Lalita, Haroun, the young Indian immigrant from Kashmir, Geeta who thinks liberally and rationally, Jagjit, the school going boy, or some rich Indian immigrants who want to make a show of their richness.

However, Divakaruni has shown not only the darker side of America or immigration but also the sunny side of America and immigration. For instance, the transformation of Lalita from a timid Indian woman to a bold lady is possible because of an American impact over her or Geeta is able to think rationally because of the sociocultural influences of America. It is an important assertion that Indian immigrant people come forward and support each other in their hard times because they all know that they are unsafe in America due to their status as immigrant.

Conclusion

The Mistress of Spices contain magical and supernatural elements. These works primarily deal with the search of identity at individual as well as at communal level. This works contain the clash of cultures which is the hallmark of Divakaruni's writing. Divakaruni attacks on the social evils through these novels. The importance of social responsibilities as well as personal happiness has been highlighted. Through her fiction Divakaruni elucidates the journey of self-perception on the part of immigrant women which is different from that of women living in India because it is full of internal as well as external conflicts. *The Mistress of Spices* offer the theme of immigrant experience from the feminine perspective. With the help of different subject matters, Divakaruni deals with first and second generation of Indian women's experiences.

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