

The Plight of the Immigrants in Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a minor part of a major research on the trials and tribulations of Indian Immigrants in the United States as depicted in a select work of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Initially, this paper focusses on the purpose of migration. The difference in approach towards native culture is dealt with; the difference between the first generation immigrants and second generation immigrants and how it disturbs the harmonious relationship of the family members, consequence of dualism, hybridity and exposure to multiculturalism and various aspects of diaspora are analysed. The novel offers a glimpse of Indian expatriates and the ordeals they undergo. Some immigrants are successful in the land of opportunities. Some people lose their life and become the victim of racial attacks. Every immigrant is engrossed in his or her quest for self-identity. Sometimes immigration nearly becomes death and rebirth. Some of the immigrants lose sense of belongingness. They are obsessed with nostalgia. They derive pleasure out of oneness and bonding. Through their oneness and bonding, they try to seek success.

KEYWORDS

Migration; Dualism; Immigrants; Belongingness.

Immigration is a worldwide phenomenon in this present age which is an age of globalization. The educated and ambitious people migrate from developing countries to developed countries in search of better prospects. Some people accompany their spouses. Some join their children who have gone abroad. When they stay abroad for a longer time, they are disconnected from their relatives, lifestyle and culture of their homeland. It gives a cultural shock for the immigrants and it makes them feel lonely, alienated and isolated. In the beginning, the new environment is different and difficult for them to cope with. Gradually some become adapted to it and become prosperous,

some return and some are frustrated and attempt to take extreme step. Superficially the lives of the immigrants may seem to be interesting. But many undergo psychological stress. It is severe in case of first generation immigrants because they find it difficult to accept the mainstream culture.

Many immigrants struggle to survive in a world which has no compassion or regard for what they value or believe. They are trained by their upbringing not to quit or give in. Hence the survival in the midst of white, pink, yellowish or iridescently blackish people in the land of opportunities is a challenge for the new immigrants. The land may appear

to be spectacular but the life away from the gregarious and friendly cultures or from the land of unity in diversity is a tight rope walking. Even though the Hindu philosophy teaches detached attachment, the Hindus feel it tough to mingle with the western people who maintain only a paranoid superficial relationships. Togetherness with multigenerational and multicultural people is an easy one in the native land, whereas it becomes an uphill task for the immigrants even though togetherness is inherent in them. The first generation immigrants are sensitive to isolation and loneliness. Solidarity and community networks are the possible solutions to drive away the isolation, frustration, dejection, depression and futility.

The isolated individuals survive through emotional bonding between or among them. By a strong and sincere bonding the immigrants are able to create a haven for themselves. They can nourish true relationships irrespective of their status, culture and language differences. The true relationship they exhibit provide not only emotional sustenance but also financial stability. They better one another's lives. Many people reach their dreams because of proper networking and socializing. To lead a full-fledged and contented life in an alien land, oneness is mandatory. A research at the University of Chicago shows that a feeling connected to others is vital to a person's mental well-being, as well as physical health. The studies reported in a new book, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* published by W. W. Norton show that a sense of rejection or isolation disrupts not only abilities, willpower and perseverance, but also key cellular processes deep within the human body.

The important oneness which drives away loneliness is depicted by the writers of Indian diaspora like Divakaruni. Tilottama, the female protagonist of the novel *The Mistress of Spices* is a mystical

woman who tries to inculcate a bonding and oneness between the dislocated and depressed immigrants. The novel is a story of Tilo or Tilottama who a first generation immigrant is running a spice store in California at the beginning of the novel. She had the name Nayan Tara, the Star of the Eye or the Star seer as soon as she was born in the village in India. She was not given proper reception when she was born since she was treated as another girl baby increasing the burden of the parents. Her extra-sensory perception like mind reading and predicting events made her famous in her village. Her parents, siblings and the villagers were frightened of her and they deprived her of homeliness. Her clairvoyant ability makes her popular and she is kidnapped by the sea pirates. She brings prosperity to the pirates but she is not contented with what she got. So she dives into the ocean in search of her final destination. She finds herself one day on a remote island inhabited by women. She encounters an ace and ancient woman who imparts and disseminates the knowledge and advantageous properties of spices to mistresses. Tilo undergoes training under her tutelage. Ordained by the trial of fire, she lands in California as the first-generation immigrant and the entrepreneur of a spice store.

She starts supplying spices not only for Indian and western cuisines but also helps her customers gain their desires through the magical powers of the spices. She has a tremendous command over the spices and with the help of their magical and curative powers, she fulfils the desires of her customers. In the trial of fire, she gains a gnarled and arthritic body of an old woman. But her eyes retain her youthful glow. In her supernatural disguise of an immortal woman she has been the successful priestess and the rescuer of her customers who are mostly Indian exiles till she meets a man whom she calls her American. She falls in love with Raven, her American who finds out that there is some

mystery around the spice seller. Though she knows that falling in love is a forbidden desire which will destroy her capabilities, she ventures to fulfill her selfish desire and she loses her power over the spices which rise up against her. Then she surrenders to the spices and the compassionate spices make her a mortal woman called Maya. The novel ends with Tilo becoming Maya who is reborn as a new and determined woman joining Raven. As Ludmila Volna observes:

"It is indeed the creation of Maya which expresses the elusive character of illusion and reality, the home and the foreign, Maya being then itself a hybrid, a 'foreign', or simplified representation." (Volna, Ludmila 87)

Tilo an expatriate undergoes many transformations just like her name which changes with every stage in her life.

Most of the characters who are immigrants lead a life of a warrior in fighting against the struggles of their lives. With the discussion of the problems of many characters, the readers get a glimpse into the range of problems that surround the life of the immigrants.

"The layers of emigrant angst and suffering in The Mistress of Spices is evocative, complex and enduring. As tale after tale of migrant narratives unfold before Tilo, the voices entwined, confused and frightened, the collective experience of marginalisation assumes urgency. As each character confronts the possible meanings of being an outsider, the complexity of their solutions become more apparent." (Rao Mehta, Sandhya 49).

Divakaruni, through her customers, catches the glimpse of Indian expatriate community. Her immigrant community includes harassed wives, credulous cab driver, a disheartened teenager, the American raised young woman and an old

man clinging to Indian system. Most of the characters lack balance because of exiled condition.

"The Mistress of Spices fulfills the purpose which it gives itself, creating a narrative capable of responding to the predicament of the post colonial diaspora." (Rao Mehta, Sandhya 47)

Her customers form a microcosm of the diasporic community. Not only the frustrated immigrants but also the contented immigrants visit her shop. An Indian father comes to get Indian sweets for his daughter. A retired couple comes and Indian homemakers select her shop as the venue for the passionate shipping. A young scientist visits her shop with a plan to impress his parents with his new culinary skills. The people from International Society for Krishna Consciousness visit her shop. Even the western people like Kwesi visit her shop but Tilo feels that the natives should go elsewhere for seeking solutions to their problems as per the instructions of her trainer.

The spices at Tilo's store remind the immigrants of their native myths and values. The explanation by Tilo reminds the customers of their great grandmother's sayings. The immigrants forget the valuable information told by their grandparents in course of time because their new American lifestyle is rapid and monotonous.

"You doubt? Ah. You have forgotten the old secrets mother's mothers knew. Here is one of them again: vanilla beans soaked soft in goat's milk and rubbed on the wrist bone can guard against the evil eye". (The Mistress of Spices 3)

Every spice has its own origin and values. It resolves the problems of the exiles and the expatriates and makes harmonious cultural connections. Elizabeth Softky's review admires the

novel for making cross-cultural connections. She explicates the situation:

"Tilo dispenses spices-not only for kofta and curry, but also for the homesickness and alienation that plagues the Indian immigrants that patronize her dusty shop" (26)

The spices are symbolic of the immigrants' longing for the values and belongingness of the lost land. The mistress was well versed with the spices, their colours, smells, names, origin and powers. Besides comparing the lifestyle of the immigrants, she compares the American spices and the Indian spices. She thinks of the values of the spices of India and the ennui of the American spices.

"Yes they hold magic, even the everyday American spices you toss unthinking into your cooking pot." (The Mistress of Spices 3)

The spices are one of the attractions that have drawn the westerners towards India and now the same spices in America attract the immigrants towards Indianness. The immigrant writers are nostalgic about their homelands. They are "imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind." (Rushdie, 10)

The spices in the novel represent food and desires at the surface level but they have deeper associations with human relations and emotions. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* are examples to exhibit the association of food with human emotions. The origin of the spices can be traced to the God of Fire which is closely related to Indian tradition and heritage and these connect and unite the diaspora people. This novel is different from Dr. J. S. Pruthi's *Spices and Condiments* which discuss about spices, their origins, their chemical properties and its export value. This novel is not based on spice technology but on the technique of dealing with emotions.

The spices represent enclosure and confinement because Tilo's power over the

spices works only when she obeys certain instructions. Tilo's customers who are not mistresses are also under some self-made confinement. They stick on to the ways of life as dictated by their former existence in India. They act as the prisoners of the past. Tilo and her customers caught in a trap of enclosure and denial of their hearty desires but her confinement and the instructions by her senior mistress are like the domination of the males or other races even after coming to the land of equality. Tilo's store stands for the exclusive female universe where men may come and go but they do not belong there. It is one of the instructions by the spices that she should not step out of the sphere of this conventional feminine territory. Initially, the mistress restricts herself to diagnosing her customers' problems and administers spice remedies. Gradually she becomes more involved and moves out of the store. Her store is just like occupying her own space in somebody's space. It is both freedom and slavery. The establishment of the store in the foreign soil represents freedom and the command of the spices to control her movements is slavery. The combination of freedom and slavery is experienced by the immigrants. If Tilo crosses her freedom, her doom is imminent. But she disobeys the commands of the spices for her selfish and selfless purpose.

"This stepping over the borders of her internal self reflects her ultimate transgression of the barriers of the space hitherto limited to one culture, which is metaphorically represented by her literal crossing of the borderlines of the store's space: till then she has not really lived in America even if the store is physically built on the American ground." (Volna, Ludmila. 79-80).

But the disobedience of the immigrant woman is not treated as a deviant feminine behaviour by the immigrants.

The mistress feels that the place loaded with Indian products is a haven and heaven for the homesick immigrants. She feels that there is no other place in the world like her spice store. Though it seems to be a hyperbolic statement, she really feels for the loss of homeliness. Tilo re-creates a little India which boasts of the lost ones.

"I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other place in the world quite like this." (The Mistress of Spices 3)

The immigrants visit her shop to satisfy their quest for happiness.

"All those voices, Hindi Oriya Assamese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other like notes from a tanpura, all those voices asking for more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where" (The Mistress of Spices 78)

Despite the immigrants being exposed to different languages, races and cultures in India, they are united in the United States since the problems they face are the same. They find the store to be their home as home is there where their hearts are and not in the place where their feet are. The store is a home away from home for the suffering immigrants.

"It attracts a large group of people for whom the place is reminiscent of home, a little oasis in their diasporic lives fraught with problems." (Banerjee, Debjani 22)

The store stands for national identity of the Indian immigrants. It is a space of freedom and self-indulgence. It may be a risky place for the brown and black people.

National boundaries are treated seriously in the context of diaspora. Even the store has confidential zones.

"National boundaries become aggressive, all important in the diaspora, as a way of defining identity, a liminality that marks the contours of one's experience, a platform for resisting co-optation by the dominant/hegemonic discourse. The store with its sacred and secret

shelves functions as a geographical/textual space that is the repository of a monolithic national identity." (Banerjee, Debjani 23)

It is one of the clear instructions by the Old One, Tilo's trainer that only Indian immigrants should visit her store and others should go somewhere else for remedies.

The first generation immigrants pass on the values of India and its spices to the second generation immigrants since they are dislocated. In course of time, the immigrants are totally engrossed in the lifestyle of the Americans and forget the values of rich Indian heritage and whenever they see Indian things in the American markets, their love for the native things overflows.

"But the spices of true power are from my birth land, land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood." (The Mistress of Spices 3)

In course of time, the immigrants lose their craze over Indian things. Jagjit being unsuccessful as an immigrant says, "Shit I don't need a smelly Indian tonic." (*The Mistress of Spices*, 122). Some immigrants are successful and some return to their native land.

The mistress and her spice shop share many similarities. They possess old appearance but they are rich in values. They satisfy and fulfill desires and have something unusual in them. The mistress acquires an old appearance when she comes out of Shampati's fire. From the beginning the shop has an old look as it has been existing for ages but it is only one year young.

"The store has been here only for a year. But already many look at it and think it was always." (The Mistress of Spices 4)

Carrying the combination of youth and oldness represents the polarities of the immigrants who struggle to retain the Indian lifestyle in the western setup. The

oldness represents the deep affinity and intimacy towards native values. The mistress retains her Indian name even in Oakland. Her full name is Tilottama. She is named after sesame seed, the spice of nourishment. Retaining Indianness despite pressure is one of the challenges of the immigrants. Some immigrants are adaptable and they anglicize their name to suit the western atmosphere just like the character Jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) and some immigrants try hard to retain their Indianness in names and beliefs. Tilo's sole motive is to empower the dislocated immigrants. So she is least bothered about americanizing her name.

The shop located in the crooked corner of Esperanza, Oakland had the discoloured pictures of the gods with their melancholic eyes. The gloomy and brooding eyes of the images represent the immigrants who undergo innumerable strife on the alien soil due to the difference in race, colour, competition in jobs and nationality. Tilo says:

"Even in the New land which is full of riches, the immigrants come with unfulfilled desires. For even here in this new land America, this city which prides itself on being no older than a heartbeat, it is the same things we want, again and again." (The Mistress of Spices 4)

The green mango leaves at the entrance of the spice store satisfies their longing to have a homely atmosphere in the alien soil. The mistress feels homely and friendly with the strangers. The fate what she faces is being shared by the immigrant Asians. When the immigrants come inside her store, they see the Indian sweets such as rasagollas, burfis, laddus and so on. They are reminded of the sweetness of the land. They long for the ways of India. When the immigrants see the handicrafts in the spice store, they long to possess as if they have lost it.

"I should understand without words their longing for the ways they chose to leave behind when they chose America. Their shame for that longing, like the bitter-slight aftertaste in the mouth when one has chewed amlaki to freshen the breath." (The Mistress of Spices 5)

Her shop becomes the much sought-after place for the immigrants. Normally the immigrants do not reveal their problems to others and after seeing the clairvoyant ability of Tilo, they share their problems. Tilo states:

"They keep their cautious faces turned away as they leave. But they will come back later. After darkness. They will knock on the shut door of the store that smells of their desires and ask." (The Mistress of Spices 6)

This kind of sharing and caring creates a kind of bonding. Oneness is developed among the immigrants irrespective of their castes and cultures. Tilo acts as a counsellor and mentor for the suffering immigrants.

"I will chant. I will administer. I will pray to remove sadness and suffering as the Old One taught. I will deliver warning." (The Mistress of Spices 7)

The feeling of being an Indian unites the immigrants irrespective of their states, races, cultures and languages. Tilo learnt the art of understanding without words, oneness and bonding on the island. She could find the same intimacy among the immigrants who are her customers. She helps Ahmad to get a green card. She saved Najib Mokhtar from the firing of his boss who is transferred to Cleveland. Besides saving him, she gets him promotion. The immigrant women experience the joy of female bonding. Divakaruni has been searching for female friendships in Indian epics and was shocked to learn the loneliness of epic heroines. She is keen on creating strong female friendships in her writings. She tries to balance the

immigrant women with their conflicting passions. She correctly says:

"I think literature is a wonderful way in which people can dissolve their differences and find common ground." (*The Hindu*, 5 November 2006: 3)

Tilo believes that women become stronger if they are united. Their friendship is very important because they share life-changing experiences like marriage and childbirth. Lata Chaturvedi says:

"As in The Mistress of Spices, Chitra Banerjee has grappled with women's experiences through female language and the intuitive aspects of female intelligence. Tilo, the protagonist forges an ideality for herself by exacting the Indian women's traditions, by looking at their subcultures, in dialogue and in imagery and at unacknowledged realms of experiential realities." (55-56)

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