

Indigenous Affinity in *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

The article portrays a clear picture of the various Indian characteristic features like religion, culture, tradition, food habits and the life style of the Indians through the novel *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It not only throws light on the positive aspects by also highlights the negative aspects like male chauvinism and women subordination prevalent not only in the Indian society but also in the emigrated population of the United States. The paper also aims at exploring the Indian cultural identity and its effects on the emigrated community. It also portrays the magical powers of the spices without which the Indian food is nothing. Tilo's divinity makes her the "Mistress of Spices" ultimately bringing out the mystical effects of spices on the sufferers.

Keywords: spices, culture, magical, emigrate

Introduction

Indian society has evolved through centuries of change. This collective consciousness has been reflected in the expatriate writings through the rich tradition of legend, culture, religious customs etc; in combination with the western ideas and their tradition. Indian culture has been fore grounded competently with negligible traces of displacement or rootlessness having intact the author's Indian sensibility and identity. The Indian English novel has won international accolades, bringing in cultures and interpreting reality from their own angle of vision. India has been variously described by different people at different times as exotic, spiritual, poor, dirty, shining etc;. Indian society has been portrayed as 'multi' on many fronts-traditional, religious, racial, ethnic and linguistic, from time immemorial. However, the country has also witnessed various kinds of divisiveness. The family and the community from the basis of all societies, yet even in these most fundamental areas discord becomes evident.

The social construction of an Ideal Indian woman has prompted scholars to probe and delve deep into the background of a monolithic construction. In reality India possesses a rich and wide variety of socio-cultural formations, ethnicities, religions and religious sects. The likeness of an ideal Indian woman is portrayed in tune with its rich traditional values enshrined in the Hindu religious texts. Many examples are quoted in these books by Indian authors. A virtuous woman is compared to the image of a 'devi' or 'goddess' in contrast to a corrupt woman who is compared to that of a 'dasi' or a 'servant'. The former image projects woman as one who is virtuous and fit to be adored and married as a wife with all valuable qualities inbuilt within her. Whereas the latter projects woman as one who is desirable and a symbol of love and sexuality who lacks virtues and not fit for family life. Both these images run parallel to each other, one symbolized by her submissiveness to the patriarchal norms and codes of conduct and the other as one who is independent, self-sufficient and assertive by nature. A perfect Indian woman is reflected as one who is passive and submissive to the dictates of the patriarchal customs and

traditions and underlines their outbursts through various folk songs against these customs and traditions, obviously within the confines of their houses and while they work in the agricultural farms.

As critics view on Divakaruni's writings: "Divakaruni is gifted with dramatic inventiveness, lyrical, sensual language, where she depicts the beauty of India and Indianness and womanhood in her writings and writing on immigrant experience on alien shores". These books are layered with stories within stories, with their sights and smells and enchanted imagery transporting the reader to India that is at once timeless and evocative of the present day. The blend of realism, fantasy and mysticism is visualized through Divakaruni's writings, in one way or the other the Indian phenomenon is seen in both the Indian and American literatures by emigrant writers as Divakaruni.

Divakaruni who is an Asian American writer with her ancestral roots from Bengal, India, has surpassed boundaries, negotiating two different worlds from various perspectives and angles. She believes that cross cultural understanding should excel the towers of academia and thus she deals with the crisis of consciousness successfully throughout her novels. Most of Divakaruni's novels address these issues tangibly or intangibly, through her own experiences while in India. She focuses on women from their socio-cultural contexts, issues regarding marriage and family, empowerment of the marginalized and women in new roles. She invokes how the emergence of an elite and educated class of women with its exposure to English education in the colonial period led to the beginning of women's writings in English.

Divakaruni's Bengali culture has been liberally sprinkled throughout her novels. Discussing 'cultural solipsism' Mrinal Miri in *Identity and Moral Life* writes, "My culture is the only culture that I have an authentic grasp of and that all I can say about other cultures simply that they are there and nothing more. The anthropologist for example does not understand another culture, he, at best, in the words of Roy Wagner, simply invents it (83).

Divakaruni abides by the rigidity of traditions but with

reservations and carves out her own identity as a 'new woman' living within the scope of tradition. Her protagonists neither shatter their ancestral dignity nor give up the essentials of modernity. They are both conformist and non-conformist. They conform to the modern values of education and marriage but they appear non-conformist to the age old tradition. Divakaruni like other contemporary women authors shares a common feeling that women should be free from the patriarchal strains. Though Divakaruni is now settled in the United States, it is the feeling of belonging and rootedness to India and her interest in women that has established her as one of the renowned writers in the contemporary era.

In spite of living in America, Divakaruni, has never failed to mention the social evils that are prevalent in the Indian society, she wants the Indian women to fight boldly against these stringent social rules and regulations laid upon them, and to come out of the cocoon as empowered women in the society. Divakaruni depicts the South Asian emigrant experience and the possible appropriation by mainstream discourses, which has significant consequences. She focuses mainly on the South Asian women who struggle amidst the male-dominated society in search of their own self-identity. Nonetheless her female protagonists are not silent sufferers they adapt themselves to the needs and requirements of others. She focuses on women from their socio-cultural contexts, issues regarding marriage and family, empowerment of the marginalized and women in new roles. All these aspects together present a very broad spectrum of Indian women as they are perceived temporally and spatially with all their variability. She attributes such monolithic social construction to the unification of identities by the colonial administration in India in its own interest or owing to a resistance to this attempt. She invokes how the emergence of an elite and educated class of women with its exposure to English education in the colonial period led to the beginning of women's writings in English.

The Mistress of Spices is a contemporary fairy tale in which 'real life' is depicted in a beautiful, almost mystical way. In her article, *Genre and Gender in the Cultural Reproduction of India as 'Wonder Tale'*, Cristina Bacchilega contends that "*The Mistress of Spices*" is an example of a contemporary tale of magic that engages the reader in folklore and a perpetuation of India as a "wonder-ful" land while simultaneously challenging boundaries (179). She points out that "both Bengali storytelling and the immigrant experience are thus represented by a singular and mythified retelling (Bacchilega 187).

In *The Mistress of spices* Divakaruni brings in a lot of indigenous traits, here the protagonist is born in India and she recalls her early days, which is unique yet sad. Through flashbacks she brings forth memories of her infancy where she was born as Nayan Tara in a village as the unwanted daughter in a poor family. Her birth itself is described with such bitterness in the novel, because girls were not well accepted into the Indian families, boys are held in high esteemed positions whereas girls were always considered as an extra burden into the family: "They named me Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, but my parents faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child.....wrap her in old cloth, lay her face down on the floor (8).

In Hindu mythology most of the Gods take the incarnation of women, therefore Divakaruni has depicted Tilo as one such

supernatural being with spiritual powers. In India if at all they identify a person to inherit such supernatural qualities immediately they will be elevated to the position of a God, this is what happens to Tilo also, she is being worshipped by all the villagers, though at one point she was degraded because of her inferior gender. She was called Bhagyavati, bringer of luck ironically and to be a sorceress, queen of the pirates, bringer of luck and death. Tilo's mystic ways continue and the snakes help her. Oldest of creatures, closest to the earth mother, all sinew and glide against her breast, "Always I have loved them. (21) Says Tilo. The snakes wanted her to be Sarpa-kanya, snake maiden. But Tilo was more fascinated by the spice island. The serpents warned, "She will lose everything, foolish one-sight, voice and name. Perhaps even self" (25). She throws herself into the ocean as per the advice of the sea-serpents. Snake worship is prevalent in Hinduism, being an Indian Divakaruni introduces snakes into this story as messengers. In the Hindu cosmology snakes are worshipped as Nagas. True to the words of the serpents Tilo lost herself. Serpents in this novel are used as messengers that guides Tilo; in India people who belong to the Hindu religion worship snakes and they are considered as Gods, thus Divakaruni brings into her novels the various aspects of Hinduism.

Tilo meets the First Mother in the island, an elderly and maternal figure demonstrating the cultural belief of the South Asian woman in the domestic sphere. After Tilo learns all that she could in the island, she is sent to Oakland, California, to a tiny Indian spice shop where she must begin her duties of healing the masses. Tilo responds to the call of the spices and serves as an initiate-sorceress under the tutelage of the old one, and it was only in her hands the spices sang back. After undergoing the last rite, a baptism by fire, Tilo is transmigrated into the body of an aging woman who runs an Indian grocery store in Oakland, California. "Wise woman shaman herb-healer, come to make things right" (28). The First Mother has trained her in such a way that she is not allowed to go out of the spice shop, though Tilo has the independence to run a shop she has too many restrictions. Divakaruni endeavours to create a female universe whether it is India or America devoid of any male influence which is typically Indian by nature. Tilo is allowed to work her spells and magic only within the confines of her rundown grocery store and only on her Indian emigrant customers. She must remain aloof and refrain from any human touch.

Divakaruni's inquiry into trans-culturalism is at once allusive, subtle and lyrical which cuts through the Indian stereotypes and presents the reader with powerful allegories of transformation and change, for example "Daksha to whom no one listens so she has forgotten how to say."(80), is the workhorse in the family hierarchy of an aging mother-in-law and a husband who will not help around the house. Daksha is a nurse in the AIDS ward, Tilo ministers Daksha through her spices, "Daksha here is seed of black pepper to be boiled whole and drunk to loosen your throat so you can learn to say NO, that word so hard for Indian women. NO, and Hear me Now (81).

Tilo gives Manu, "a senior at Ridgefield High, (80) a "slab of sesame candy made with sweet molasses, gur to slow down just to hear the frightened love in your father's voice losing you to America (80) when he is not allowed to attend the school. And the traumatic plight of Jagjit is described, where his mother does not want him to give away his tradition and

culture and forces him to wear a green turban unable to understand the fact that at school her son would remain alienated if at all he does not adhere to the American culture, “Jagjit all alone whose parents were too worn with work and worry in a strange land to hear him, Jagjit who went home each day from America to a house so steeped in Punjabi how could they help. Who held his cries in until red swam behind his eye-lids like bleeding stars (80).

The first patron introduced to the reader is Ahuja’s wife Lalita, an attractive but downtrodden creature bound to be home through an arranged marriage to a much older domineering Indian husband. Lalita’s story is the same story of many of the women in India. The American culture has not changed Ahuja a bit he is very much Indian at heart and his thoughts and views are still very conservative unlike the modern western culture. Divakaruni focuses on the struggle of women amidst the male-dominated society in search of their own self-identity. Nonetheless her female protagonists are not silent sufferers they adapt themselves to the needs and requirements of others. This does not mean they go by the will and wish of others. In dire situations they mould them according to the situations and courageously fight for their rights.

The Indian –American tangle of tradition and culture is well shown in the episode of Geeta and her grandfather. Geeta’s grandfather tries to fix an arranged marriage for his granddaughter. He is shocked and floored by her response and confronts her with questions of what is so wrong with living such a life. “You are losing your caste,” the grandfather accuses Geeta in an impassioned speech, “and putting blackest kali on our ancestors’ faces to marry a man who is not even a sahib, whose people are slum criminals and illegals (93). From his perspective, Geeta’s behaviour is absolutely inexcusable and she is vaulting the entire family into humiliation through her actions. He is torn apart by the possibility of such behaviour from his granddaughter. It is an undeniable fact that marriage assures a distinct status to women in the Indian society. Closely linked with marriage in these societies is the age of marriage, which is considered to be the key which leads to attainment of social status. Marriage in India has been traditionally very closely related to the caste hierarchy and caste endogamy has remained a critical point in arranging marriages.

Divakaruni, while re-creating her characters towards development and self-assertion makes extensive use of these significant items of the Hindu cosmological imagery like the fire and water, she skilfully relates it with the female stereotypes. The concept of fire is often used and fire is a significant phenomenon of Hindu cosmology. Fire in Hinduism is often associated with destruction, especially at the end of the world and it is one of the main roles of the fire God Agni. It is this representation of fire which the author uses to demonstrate the destruction and sacrificial features of Tilo’s condition in *The Mistress of Spices*.

Anita Mannur identifies In her book *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, that some critics have challenged *The Mistress of Spices*, as assuming the concealed presence and maintenance of Orientalism in Divakaruni’s depiction of spices which renders them exotic, and sensual, and Eastern. In fact, Mannur claims: “Because of its overtly self-exoticizing terms routed through the culinary imaginary approximates the style of food pornography, the novel is frequently omitted in Asian American literary studies and

discussions of Indian American literature (89). However, Mannur also asserts that this assessment of the exotic within the novel is somewhat singular in focus and is not a complete representation of the novel as a whole. It is instead arguable that Divakaruni uses such ‘Orientalism’ to “position spices... as magical palliatives that counter the effects of racism and social inequity (95). Mannur concludes with an assessment that, “critics, perhaps hastily, overlook the novel’s well intentioned attempt to negotiate complexities (118).

Indian spices are famous throughout the world, and India is also famous for its spicy food. The food habits too is not so easily changed, the same rice, rajma, sabji and kheer is served for dinner, “The mother call out and the children come running from homework, chairs are pulled up, the steaming dishes brought in. Rice. Rajma. Karela sabji. Kheer” (63). Divakaruni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* reveals before us the predicament of the emigrant Indians in America, with a very strong Indian spicy touch. The chapters are titled as Tilo, turmeric, cinnamon, fenugreek, asafoetida, fennel, ginger, peppercorn, kalojir, neem, red chilli, lotus root, sesame and Maya. Divakaruni has brought forth all the Indian aspects through her character Tilo. The primary religion that is being followed in India is Hinduism and Divakaruni tries to weave in, the Hindu tradition and its characteristic features through her novels. Through this novel Divakaruni, brings forth her interest towards Ayurveda, the traditional ancient Hindu system of medicine and cooking for medicinal purposes and good luck spices to cast away evil like haldi, mustard seeds etc. This is a modern fable that has turned out to be a dazzling tale of misbegotten dreams and desires, hopes and expectations, woven with poetry and storytelling magic. It is a tale of joy and sorrow and one special woman’s magical powers.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni proficiently brings in the idea that no matter where you live, you will always carry the rich heritage and culture within you and can create and establish your own identity in an alien land in spite of all the short comings and adversities that you go through. Divakaruni’s approach towards ethnic identity is contingent with the view of Indianness that believes in the necessity of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience. In all these novels we can find the author highlighting the religious practices of the Hindus, she also lays emphasis on the food habits, dressing sense and other Indian cultural aspects which India is famous for.

As critics view on Divakaruni's writings: "Divakaruni is gifted with dramatic inventiveness, lyrical, sensual language, where she depicts the beauty of India and Indianness and womanhood in her writings and writing on immigrant experience on alien shores". These books are layered with stories within stories, with their sights and smells and enchanted imagery transporting the reader to India that is at once timeless and evocative of the present day. The blend of realism, fantasy and mysticism is visualized through Divakaruni's writings, in one way or the other the Indian phenomenon is seen in both the Indian and American literatures by emigrant writers as Divakaruni. In her book, *On the Outside Looking In(dian): Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad*, Phillipa Kafka credits Divakaruni as one of the diasporic authors who “writ eloquently on the issues that arise either for them or for their characters in the West” (26). By superimposing the issues and problems of individuals in

diaspora on to a backdrop of a well-known Indian myth, Divakaruni has succeeded in narrating a magnificently rich, complicated story that resonates, the Indian culture in an American set up.

References

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