

## INDIAN DIASPORIC WOMAN WRITER CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE MISTRESS OF SPECIES

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### Abstract

This research paper explores the concept of national identity and cultural identity in diasporic writing. The issue of national identity is more precisely presented by the diasporic writers. They are made to appropriate and integrate into a new culture; they often find themselves alien in the new country. They try to relate themselves with the culture of the host country, but their origin and root leads them towards the homeland; with whom to identify themselves and where to find the feeling of belongingness become major problems for them.

In the present paper, the researcher attempt to explore the cultural identity in *The Mistress of Species*. The sense belongs to both the nations and neither to any particular nation, which ultimately develops a sense of being rootless.

**Keywords:** Magic, Diaspora, Identity, Transnationalism

The world scenario has been changed after the globalization. The entire world is bound to each other. For India, it opens with India's liberalization policy and an economic reforms that began in 1991. The diasporic writers seek the loss of cultural identity through their literature. The loss of identity in alien country has been increased. The people who live in other countries seek cultural stability in their own people.

Glick Schiller defines "Transnational migration is described as a pattern of migration in which persons, although they move across international borders and settle and establish social relations in a new state, maintain social connections with the polity from which they originated. They live across international borders in transnational social fields." The communities move out of their homes or polity, the diasporas still connections, and these ongoing connections make them truly transnational for they cut across boundaries. The transnational character of diasporas is an outcome of the globalization process.

In the present era of globalization, issues relating to national and cultural identity have increased in the multicultural societies as a result of the extensive Diaspora of the current era. Either for academic pursuit or economic gain or career opportunity the immigration of Indians towards the Middle East or to the Western countries particularly the US has increased. The inhabitants of these host countries react differently to the immigrants. These immigrants offer face the clash between cultures of their own original and that of the new adopted culture of the host country.

Indian diasporic women writers like Bharati Mukharjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jumpha Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor, Meena Alexander have contributed in enriching diasporic literature. They deal with basic and characteristic aspects of transnational and diasporic identity. All these women writers have dealt with the aspect of the migrant women's anguish. These writers have portrayed cultural dilemmas, the generational

differences, the racial discrimination and transformation of the identities in the lives of the migrants. The diasporic writers are attached to their homeland and physically they are caught between two worlds.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian born American diasporic woman writer. She immigrated to the United States at the age of 19. Her books are set in both India and America. She is a professor, activist, an award-winning writer. She wrote 21 books include *Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, *Palace of Illusions*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, and *The Last Queen*. She received American Book Award in 2024 for her latest novel *Independence*. Her work been made into films, plays and dance dramas, and performed as operas. Her awards include an American Book Award, a PEN Josephine Miles award, a Premio Scanno, and a Light of India award. In 2015 *The Economic Times* included her in their List of 20 Most Influential Global Indian Women. She is the McDavid professor of Creative Writing in the internationally acclaimed Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston and lives in Houston with her husband Murthy.

The novel *The Mistress of Species* published in 1995 and film was released in 2005. It is directed by Paul Mayeda Berges, with a script by Berges and his wife, British filmmaker Gurinder Chadha. The film stars Aishwarya Rai and Dylan McDermott. Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* is representative of diasporic identity. She was born in India, becomes trained in spices and called the Mistress of Spices. She comes across many characters representing vivid identities of diasporic life like scattered identity, marginalized, rebellious, docile, traditional and modern. She portrays younger women, first and second generations who find their true identity in American land and Tilo in novel is an example of complexities of transformation and assimilation.

*The Mistress of Spices* is not concerned more with the migrants character's choice for the host country over their native country. It discusses both the possibilities of integration in the host country and that of return to the home country either in reality or in the mind of the character. However Divakaruni's mastery in dealing with and viewing both the cultures with equal admiration and deference made such remark possible.

In *The Mistress of Spices* she makes use of world of myth and magic in order to explore the various kinds of problems encountered by immigrants. Divakaruni herself says for what reason, she has written this novel; "I wrote in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable".

The first person narrative technique explored the authenticity to the tale of the protagonist. The whole story has been narrated from the perspective of Tilo or Tilotama. She is proficient to extract the essence of the spices and make them to relieve pain, solve problems and help people to live better lives. She endures pains at various stages of her life. First as a daughter she was scorned until her special magical powers were identified and accepted. Then when she was kidnapped by the pirates, her identity issue takes a horrible turn. It is only after her arrival at the island of spices.

Tilo receives her glorious identity as the Mistress of Spices. She has been gifted with the supernatural power to understand the voices of the spices. She has the capacity to indication disasters and look into the hearts of people. She runs a spice store in Oakland California, where she has recreated little India. She mentions her store as a kind of a reminiscent of home for a large group of Indians in a little oasis in their diasporic lives full of cultural and racial problems. Tilo feels that the Indians come to her store in quest of happiness. She says “all those voices, Hindi, Oriya, Assamese, Urdu, Tamil, English, Layered one on the other like notes from tanpura, all those voices asking for happiness except no one seems to know where (79) ”

The consciousness regarding national boundary can be seen as a way of defining identity. This consciousness regarding national boundary can be seen as a way of defining identity. The spice store of Tilo with all its sacred, secret spices is in itself a geographical boundary that is the storehouse of Indian national identity. Henceforth, the powers of magic is work for the good of Tilo’s own people i.e. Indians. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need as she has been warned by her first mother. As a result the concept of national boundaries is all important in the Diaspora and this warning may makes the concept more aggressive.

When Tilo develops emotional relationship with a Native American man, her identity as the Mistress too is shattered as she struggles with her own passions. She is fully aware of the consequences of her physical transformation. If she goes against the laws of the order of the Mistresses, she must leave her own domain of the beautiful spice store. Once she is in touch with her own sexuality, she can no longer soften others pains or even see in to the future, but she can live the life of a young woman.

To seek her identity as a young woman means to abandon the life of that caring angel. She is dividing between these identities choices also; as she cannot be the both. Her work and power in the spice shop has helped her in fulfilling her mission of life, whereas her own desires and emotional fulfillment only can make her a complete woman.

At the end of the novel, Tilo becomes Maya, the young woman who has abandoned her special powers, "I who now have only myself to hold me up". (Divakaruni, 311) and found her new home through an act of cultural translation. The entire novel has been classified with the names of different spices as each chapter of the novel is given the title of a spice.

In the early part of the novel, Tilo reveals her own past and her history of migration from the world of magic to the multicultural society of America. With all sympathy she shares the anguish and experience of immigrants who had chosen America as a land of their dreams. She declares her mission of life; "It seems right that I should have been here always, that I should understand without words their longing for the ways they chose to have behind when they chose America” (39).

Tilo’s identity is uncertain between the past and the present. She is a young woman in the disguise of an old woman. She herself is undecided between these dual identities. Her efforts to help and guide her country people in a foreign land may be seen as her desire to

seek identity in an alien culture. Among the customers at the spice store, Ahuja's wife, a young and beautiful immigrant woman is also a struggling migrant. The glamour of wealth has fascinated her for a marriage with an American. Like other immigrant woman in the US, she too struggles with her own feelings of isolation and homelessness and at the same she is also a victim of female domination.

Tilo has both the realization and sympathy for the pain of immigrant woman who struggles with double diffidence and tries to resist both the forces of gender apathy and cultural antagonism. Her plight reminds Tilo of her own pain that she has felt in her homeland at the hands of the pirates. Ahuja's wife survives in American society with the insecurity that she will never be able to go back to her roots, the same feeling of losing roots has also been experienced by Tilo in her homeland and to which she has successfully assimilated and relocated herself in her new identity as the Mistress.

The sympathy of Tilo for her customers serves the purpose of defence mechanism of her own sorrow and anguish. It gives her an opportunity to muse over her own unexpressed fears and uncertainty in this alien land. Her spice store not merely helps the Indian immigrants to relieve their pain and redefine their new position in the US, it also helps her to reconnect herself with her past: how she was thrown on Dal Lake and was compelled to row Shikara for the pleasure of American tourists and how she became the mistress.

The Mistress of spices gives plenty of sources on diasporic grounds. It enhances the Indian glory into the past and present world. The intermingling of both cultures reflects more on Indian immigrants, who are curious of Indian land. The magical realism of the east and the exotic land viewed with western eyes enhances the Indian beauty of spices and their magic.

The problem of immigrants is always a pathetic world that creates the feeling of rootlessness and marginality moving from one homeland to another. Such moving away from one's homeland leads to homelessness resulting in search for New Homes.

Divakaruni investigates the discontent of new settlers making distressed attempts to seek their roots in distant cultural surrounding troubled by the slow shadows of their homelands. Divakaruni provides all the Indian vision of cultural, traditional and moreover magical realism.

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