



## Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

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### Rootlessness and Cultural Conflicts in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Mistress of Spices

I. Diana Rachal Gnanadeepam

Department of English and other foreign languages, SRM institute of science and technology, Ramapuram campus, chennai-89

[dianarachalmphil@gmail.com](mailto:dianarachalmphil@gmail.com)

#### Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the galaxy of women writers exhibits her exceptional sensibility to reconstruct the diverse human experiences with the deep undercurrent of human concern and rich emotional appeal. Divakaruni in the construction of the immigrant's looks at all sides of problems including internal and external variables. With the inevitable lingering shadows of past, the absolute assimilation seems impossible. The agony of migrancy depends on the level of education and the motives behind immigration. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fictional art radiates the various dimension and shades of the existence of woman in male dominated social order. Her world of feminine experiences is complex, delicate and dynamic inhabited by the women twisting in the contradictory shades of tradition and modernity sharing the burden of the practices of Oriental and Occidental simultaneously. Chitra Banerjee through her novels constructs the world of immigrant's experiences and represents the plight of Indian immigrant women. The emotional identification and affirmation of self-anguish through their conflicts provide a rare authenticity to her narrative presentations. With the nostalgia of these women immigrants, she represents her own emotional affinity with Indian culture and Indian traditions. She makes a confession that without having an insight in the inner consciousness of Indian women, her fictional art world has been weak and insignificant.

#### 1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee's characters especially women, feel trapped in arranged marriages, because they have not married following the choice of their hearts but that of tradition. Hence they long for freedom. The Indian woman can apparently be called 'a mistress of spices', as she is in control of the preparation of food in the kitchen, a space intimately attributed to her. Her kitchen, nevertheless, as a space of enclosure, is a representation and symbol of her submission. Chitra Banerjee's protagonists aspire to adapt to their newfound world easily. Unlike the female characters of the older generation the women of younger generation are firmly rooted in tradition and are ready to break the bounds set by patriarchy to experience what has so far been restricted in their life. They try to resolve the psychological conflict that is accompanied with the new situation. Chitra Banerjee vividly presents the dilemmas of Indian women in traditional society. Her women characters represent the sentiments of women within and without the traditional bounds. Chitra Banerjee among the women writers of Indian diaspora has secured a distinctive position as a tireless experimenter. For her each idea provides ample opportunities to design the unconventional narrative structures that can be defined as metanarrative appropriate to deconstruct innumerable invisible threats operating on the sensibility of the characters resisting the forces that are beyond the control and speculations of them. In the Galaxy of immigrant's literature, Divakaruni breaks the traditional matrix of 'home and homelessness' and constructs varied narrative patterns to provide ample spaces to her immigrant characters to reveal their suppressed sensibility for their homeland. As a writer she fulfils a significant role, the role of the 'connector' of cultures. She writes with the assumption that women as immigrants, have a better sense of cultural identity and they can more successfully work for the assimilation of cultures. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1992) invited lot of appreciation and attention for its extraordinary brilliance in presenting the multiplicity of themes. In this novel Divakaruni presents a wide spectrum of human experiences with the specific focus on the plight of existence of the life of immigrants. The narrative in the novel develops through the consciousness of Tilo, a young woman born in another time in a faraway place. She attains perfection in the ancient art of spices with an extraordinary command on their properties and the possibilities of administration. For her perfection in the art of spices, she has been ordained as 'The Mistress of Spices'. At the very outset of the novel, she asserts, 'I am a Mistress of Spices.' With the extraordinary confidence in her ability, she declares: "I know their original and what their color signifies and their smells. I can call each by the true names, it was given at the first, when earth split like skin and

offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood. From Amchur to Zafran, they bow to my command. As a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers”(3) She is proud of her native identity and welcomes India for exceptional power of spices. In all her pride, she makes a declaration, “The spices of true power are from birthland, land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood.”(3).Divakaruni in ‘**The Mistress of Spices**’, has manipulated the entire spectrum of spices to construct her poetics of ‘home’ and ‘homelessness’.Tilo admits that most of the immigrants inspite of their fascination for American life, again and again want the same thing. Hence in ‘**The Mistress of Spices**’, the idea of immigration is presented with a distinctive colour of human sympathy. The nostalgia and the psyche of homelessness is interrupted by Tilo as a sickness. In her role as a Mistress of spices, Tilo seems to have achieved a serious purpose of life. She accepts, “It seems right that I should have been always that I should understand without words their longing for the ways they chose to leave behind when they chose America.”(5)Tilo shares the pain of others but simultaneously has a realisation of her own pain that in America, none is aware of her real name and identity, “I think that across the entire length of this land not one person knows who I am.” (5) She begins her life in America with the realisation that her identity is not significant in this strange land and what is important is the ‘store and the spices’. In **The Mistress of Spices**, Tilo’s store becomes a symbolic community centre for the immigrants sharing not only geographical isolation but also shows the possibilities of emotional fraternity. Tilo’s longing represents the persistent longing for home land echoing the sensibility of immigrants. As a mistress of spices she remains an onlooker to perceive the reality of the life of American immigrants.

In **The Mistress of spices**, Divakaruni makes a classification of chapters named after the names of popular spices. It suggest that spices have been employed as a part of major metaphor integrated in the texture of the novel with the totality of human experiences. Tilo notices that most of the customers used to come only on Friday because it used to be a holiday for ‘lonely Americans’. Tilo presents a very suggestive account of the social and mental seclusion of those customers who appear to be the living images of ruin and nothingness. The picture presented by Tilo is pathetic, sarcastic and depressing. She reveals, It’s not as if I haven’t seen Americans. They come in here all the time, the professor type in tweed with patches in jacket elbows or in long skirts in earnest with colours. Hence Krishna’s in wrinkled white kurtas with shaved heads, back pack totting students in seldom-loudest jeans, left over hippies lankaired and beaded. They want fresh coriander seed, organic of course, or pure ghee for a karma free die, or yesterday’s burfis at half price.(69). Tilo investigates the inner psyche of these immigrants almost like a psychologist and in her investigations the reconstruction of emotional longings is more significant. She almost dives deep into the consciousness of Kwasi. It is not a matter of the emotional longing of the immigrant customers but also the expression of her own suppressed longing. She confesses, “American, I too am looking, I thought all my looking was done when I found the spices but then I saw you and now I no longer know.” (71) She realizes that the only mission in her life is to fill the “hollow” of her own life with the needs of the “lonely customers” whom he intends to serve. Such a pathetic longing is suggestive of the fact that Divakaruni uses her pen to reconstruct the private world of immigrants beyond the paradigms of geographical dislocation with the manifestation of external variables like language, religious faiths and cultural variations. As a writer of diaspora, she penetrates beneath the skin and touches the tissues that are as sensitive as mulberry plants. She confesses, “In my head as echo like a song of stone. A Mistress must carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves.” (71) The spice store of Tilo becomes a mechanism to seek a fulfillment in her own life.In the *Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni takes three dimensional approach-Tilo’s cocoon of mistress like life, Tilo’s isolation as an immigrant and Tilo’s suppressed sensibility as a woman. beneath these three layers of consciousness ,stands the real self of Tilo as a sensitive woman. With the ouch of kwasi, there is a sensation in her inner self that was beyond her power of resistance. She makes an honest confession of her own sensation: What words can I choose to describe it, this touch that goes through me like a blade of fire,yet so sweet that I want the hurting to never stop. I snatch my hand way obedient to the mistress laws but the sensation stays.(72). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of those artists who look at the both sides of the problem. Tilo in spite of her innate bonding with the community of immigrants, does not fail to look at the snobbery of the rich Indians who sacrificing their nationality survive with their own egoistical sublime. She through the consciousness of Tilo reflects on the sensibility of all the category of immigrants. In the texture of **The Mistress of spices**, Divakaruni has woven a complex pattern of human experiences involving personal and impersonal, immigration and nativity, supernatural and human. Tilo beneath the crest of her role as the redeemer of the pain of isolated immigrants, preserves a private self of her own concealing the warmth of her personal passions as a sensitive woman, a world of her irresistible female desires. Divakaruni through the conversion of Tilo makes it evident that it is rooted in human nature to seek the cultivation of roots through the involvement in personal relationship. Tilo’s dual identity as a mistress of spices and the identity as a sensitive woman-both work in the identical direction and persists her to liberate herself from the shackles of borrowed identity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* constructs some intricate domains of feminine sensibility. Tilo remains conscious of her duties for the customers but does not compromise with her sentiments and passion for Haroun. However, she is sensitive enough to get a trial and tast of her real love that can ensure her real peace and contentment. It is noteworthy that Divakaruni in conversion of the consciousness of Tilo uses her intense emotional longing existing in the heart of Indian women immigrants. In **The Mistress of spices** , Divakaruni traces a complex growth of human

sentiments. If Tilo uses her prohibited art of the secret command over spices, to redeem the pain of immigrants, there are also the possibilities of assimilations. In the later part of the novel **The Mistress of Spices**, Divakaruni entirely focuses on the renewed feminine consciousness of Tilo who finally comes to the realisation that her effort to suppress feminine sensibility is not true to her blood. The idea of closing the door is her ultimate withdrawal from the world of magic and illusion. Her shift from the store of spices to the apartment of Haroun is a shift to her real self where she desperately seeks a new identity for her survival. As soon as Haroun opens his door with the comment, "Welcome to my Home." She is confused, looking at his joy and nervousness, Tilo comments, "I am amazed to realise he is nervous, my American. Deep in me, a surging love and a new desire, to reassure this man." (305) She appreciates white carpet, sofas of white carpet, large painting, bookshelf filled with book with a specific fascination of batik of Buddha, "lotus hand raised in compassion." (305) Her sensation is at apex in the company of Raven. In the realisation of the feminine sensibility of Tilo, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni dives deep into the authenticity of feminine sensibility.

The end of the novel *The Mistress of Spices* has been invented with a wholistic perception of human condition. The narrative floats through the three dimensions of the consciousness of Tilo, the mistress of spices, Tilo. The woman and Tilo the immigrant. With her persistent efforts, Tilo finally gets success in uniting the three divergent selves into one unit admitting the possibilities of the union of diverse sensibilities. Being disgusted with the burden of metaphysical world, she seeks a solace in the company of Raven. The guilt conscious disturbs her and she dreams of going back to Oakland. Dividing amid the alternative identities, she ultimately determines to resume a new name, a new identity and a new sensibility that might have supported her to obliterate the passing shadows of both the worlds. Finally she decides to leave her Tilo like identity and implores Raven to find her out a new name, "My Tilo life is over and with it that way of calling myself." (337) On Raven's query about the type of name she wanted, Tilo reveals a very ambitious plan, the plan of the survival with a name that can help her to unite two nations and two sensibilities. Tilo seems to have become a prediction to resist the challenges of cultural diversities. It also seems to be a manifestation of the cosmopolitan vision integrated in the mind and sensibility of Indians. Tilo's interaction with different immigrants in context of their unexpressed isolation and suffering traps her own consciousness and she becomes desperate to seek fulfillment through her involvement in the life of Haroun. Tilo's inner consciousness turns between her realisation of responsibility towards her professional life and the life of personal and desires.

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