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Finding Ourselves: Through *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

NABANITA MOHAPATRA

PH.D SCHOLAR, SAMBALPUR UNIVERSITY

ODISHA

Abstract: Diasporic literature has always been associated with the loss of identity, the quest for self, nostalgia, and uprootedness from culture and tradition. Home away from home has always been difficult, and now in this 21st century with all the technological advances, it still feels the same. With all these developments in science and technology, it is not always easy to come back to our homeland. With all the adjustments made by us away from home, we somewhere try to create our own identity in a new land. On the verge of creating our own identity, we tend to lose ourselves more. Diasporic writers such as Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have spoken about identity loss, and their stories are always about identifying and creating one's own identity. *The Mistress of Species* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the story of Tilo and her transformation into Maya, where she identifies herself. This paper will focus on the journey of Tilo and her experiences with other characters who are all lost in a foreign land. The magical effects of the spices helped the characters deal with their problems. When Tilo stepped out of her store to assist someone, she broke free from the chains tied to her which represents the society and the role of women who are always guided by society. It is true that in today's time we have come far away from these situations, but doesn't it still feel the same when a woman suddenly does something that she was not expected to do? Globalisation has made us all come together and has helped us to reach a post-modern world, but still creating our own identities and discovering ourselves will always be a continuation for all the upcoming generations.

Keywords: Indian Diasporic Writing, Self-quest, loss of identity, Nostalgia, Homeland.

The term "diaspora" was earlier defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the movement of Jewish people from their own countries to other countries in search of work. Later on, the term "diaspora" was used to define a group of people who are away from their homeland and are geographically scattered in the form of minorities in foreign countries. People started to migrate from their native lands to other countries for personal or political reasons. Some decided to pen down their experiences, which gave us diasporic literature. The diasporic literature deals with the emotions of the narrator, who was forced to leave their homeland. The narratives mainly deal with themes like loss of identity, a quest for self, alienation, nostalgia, and uprooting from culture and tradition. They try to show us the journey that narrators faced when they visited a foreign land either to settle or in need of some work away from their own people without any knowledge of its language, culture, or geographical areas. As Monica Ali, a British writer from Bangladesh, says, "They were both lost in cities that would not pause even to shrug." It is true that people have become so busy within themselves that they no longer have time to stand back and look after their own kin. In this situation, whenever someone travels to some unknown place to settle down it becomes more difficult as there is no one who can actually sit back and listen to the worries and problems that one face.

The sea voyages at the time of the Elizabethan era explored that there were other lands that belonged to people who were different from them in different aspects. After that, slowly, people started to migrate from one country to another in search of a better livelihood as per their needs. During and after colonisation, people started to immigrate out in the fear of war and slavery. They needed to protect themselves from the damage that occurred during that time. In the present scenario, things have changed. People want to travel to other countries to explore them, some travel to study, some travel for jobs and after spending a lot of time there, they settle there at their convenience. Time has changed, and the facilities of airplanes have made travel easier. The magic of the internet has brought the world together. But still, when loneliness and insecurity about oneself take over, it wreaks havoc in lives. The chaos increases and leads to an identity crisis, which can be seen as a leading theme in diasporic literature.

In modern Indian English literature, diasporic writers can be divided into two categories. One category is those who were born and brought up in India but are now settled in foreign countries. Spending the entire childhood in one place and then leaving for unavoidable reasons is a difficult task, and a diasporic writer pens down these thoughts to recreate all of their memories from their native lands. The other categories are those who grew up outside India and have seen India as an outsider. They feel disconnected from their land, but they have learned a lot about their ancestors and their native land from their parents or from pictures that they have seen on the internet. These writers write to feel connected to their native places. Both of them have contributed a lot of narratives by portraying the characters of immigrants who experience the emotions of displacement, alienation, dealing with both cultures, and adapting to the new land. Indian English writers like V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meena Alexander, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai, and many more are the prominent stars of Indian Diasporic Literature.

One such star is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who was born on July 29, 1956, in Kolkata and moved to the United States in 1976 to complete her master's degree. After that, she continued her Ph.D. and got settled there. She says,

I began to appreciate many things I had taken for granted while living in India. I also began to question the traditional or repressive views about women. I could see what a powerful effect immigration has on the lives of people, as well as how immigrants are changing the landscape of America. That led to my poems, and then my first collection of stories — *Arranged Marriage* (Das).

Her collection of short stories titled *Arranged Marriage* (1995) won the American Book Award. Some of her other excellent works are *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), and *The Last Queen* (2021). Her stories are mostly settled in the United States and India. Her novels deal with stories about South Asian immigrants who explain the challenges faced by them. The characters of her novels are inspired from her own life, as she did all kinds of odd jobs during her master's to earn money. The characters in her novel too struggle to accommodate themselves in the alien land by earning money from errands. She shares,

All these jobs made me respect labour and also made me aware of the hardship of living such a life. Many of my characters go through hard times and are involved in odd jobs as they struggle through situations of financial and emotional difficulty. My own hardships have made me more sympathetic to writing about such times (Das).

Divakaruni beautifully illustrates the character that lives in two worlds at the same time, like Indian immigrants, who are still Indian in their hearts but are also struggling to create their own space or identity in America. The struggles are not too extraneous. She is a wonderful writer who tries to paint her characters in such a way that we can relate to some of them as our own. She displays the problems of loneliness, alienation, rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning oneself, identity crisis, etc., which are the characteristics of diasporic literature. As her characters are mainly immigrants, they have their roots within them when they get dispersed to a new land, but they have to get adjusted to the new culture and adapt to a new way of living, which means they have to create a new space for themselves where they can stay as per the old and new customs. But somewhere in between, they lose themselves, which leads to an identity crisis. People whether they stay in their nation or travel to other each one of them want to be recognised by others. Everyone try to create their own identity which may make them unique so that they might look different from others. She justifies her characters by making them fight their own battle to win their identity. She not

only deals with diasporic themes, her narratives include other topics like woman empowerment, divorce, miscarriages, economic barriers, racism, and so on. Relating to her characters she states,

My characters struggle in the balance between family responsibilities and Individual happiness which is in away, at the centre of conflict between our Hindu culture, which always shows the mother as the giver, nurture and sacrificing herself for the good of the family and the western concept of self happiness. (8)

Divakaruni's female characters are a lot more challenging, as they stand as an ideal for many women who were in search of their own identity in their homeland and are then suddenly standing in a new land with no thoughts about how to create their own space in this global world. It gets difficult for a woman to adjust herself to a new surrounding as she has to always keep herself checked with her family culture as well as the norms set for her by the society. After all the fulfilment of the rules then only she gets her success but when she decides to step aside all these rules she is labelled as a rebel. One of her finest works, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), has an independent and rebellious female character who sets a great example for every woman. It is set in Oakland, California, and is a story about many Indian immigrants connected to the protagonist, Tilottama, who acts as a saviour to them in the alien land. The novel is divided into chapters by the names of spices, starting with a chapter about the protagonist and ending with her transformations. As the title itself says the story is about an Indian immigrant mistress who deals with spices. The relationship between an Indian and spice is really unbreakable. The spices add flavours to our bland food, and in this story, the spices are adding colours to the characters' lives. The spices have some magical elements within them who plays a role in the betterment of the characters and when they are unheard by their mistress they play tricks on the characters to take revenge from the mistress. This shows that the novel deals with the theme of magic realism. This results in a mixture of fantasy and realism. Divakaruni principally focuses on the identity of an immigrant, their challenges and how they overcome it.

The Mistress of Spices is a story about personal desires, expectations, hope, dreams, struggles, accepting and adapting other cultures. The protagonist, Tilottama, is known as the brave woman who owns a spice shop, from which she is forbidden to step out. This forbidden part is somewhat like the scene from the great Indian epic *Ramayana*, where Lakshmana draws a Lakshmana Rekha to protect Sita, but when she came out of it, she was captured by Ravana. Similarly, when Tilottama comes out of the shop, she falls into many troubles. Every girl in India is placed in such rekhas, where she is expected to maintain family honor. Despite gender, it is really important to come out of it, which actually slowly becomes a comfort zone, so that one can create their own identity.

Tilottama is known as the mistress of spices, which can be symbolically seen as the saviour for the Indian immigrants. The journey of Tilo started in her childhood when she was known as *Nayan Tara*, Star of the Eye. Later on she was known as *Bhagyavati*, Bringer of Luck, and then she achieved the magic of spices, after which she named herself as *Tilottama*, life-giver, restorer of health and hope. At the end, she is known as *Maya*, an illusion. Tilo was the star of the eye for her birthplace, then she was the bringer of luck for the pirates and dear to the serpents, she later on lived her life to help others, and at the end she understands that Maya, or the illusions, is the power that "keeps this imperfect world going day by day" (317). This transformation represents the life of a single individual who changes themselves as per the demands of the situation. The belief of the rest of the world should always accompany inner self-belief. A person changes with time, but some moments stay engraved in their souls, which certainly leads them to their destiny.

The other major characters of this story are the bougainvillea girls, Haroun, Hameeda, Ahuja's wife (Lalita), Jagjit, Raven, Geeta, and her grandfather, who all came abroad to make a good fortune. They all came to the spice bazaar to collect their ingredients, but when they stepped out of that shop, they also got back their self confidence that they had long lost in their journey through life. Haroun came from the earthly paradise of India, i.e. Srinagar, but the war and violence forced him to start his life afresh as a taxi driver in Oakland. Hameeda's husband left her because she could not give him a male heir, so she shifted to stay with her brother, started to take classes to get a job, and later fell in love with Haroun. Ahuja's wife, Lalita, had a great time at her parent's house but when she came to live with her husband, who believed that women should stay at home just like any other furniture and do not have any right to create their own identities. Jagjit was bullied by the white children at his school for his turban and for not knowing the English language. Raven was struggling to know himself and was in a constant battle with his mother. Geeta had adapted to the culture of Oakland but kept her Indian roots strong. Her grandfather misunderstood her, which created havoc in her family. Each one of them came with dreams in their eyes for a better and safer

life far from their own homeland. Though they all respected their native land, but due to the unavoidable circumstances they had to move to a foreign land in search of homes.

All these characters dealt with their own problems and were helped by the mistress of spices, Tilo, unaware of the fact that the spices had so many hidden magical powers that helped them to live a more comfortable life in a foreign place. Tilo used to hear out their stories and then give them the spices that showed their magical effects on their lives without their knowledge. Indirectly, Divakaruni, symbolised the spices as the characters of an immigrant that they should have, to survive in a foreign land. Like turmeric, which heals our wounds, was actually asking the immigrant to heal from the past memories and pain that we have left behind, while cinnamon is represented as a friend maker, which asks us to make friends in a new surroundings. “[F]enugreek who renders the body sweet again, ready for loving” (Divakaruni 47) motivates people to appreciate others whereas asafoetida is an antidote to love, which might help you to forget the pain given by the loved ones. Fennel suggests keeping our mental strength and our anger under control, ginger is the representation of courage, and peppercorn sweats out the secrets, which can help to understand people better and to have someone without any conspiracy. Kalo jire protects us from evil eye which is a gentle reminder that we should be cautious of people that we meet, the red chilli symbolises for not breaking rules and at the last, sesame to be protective. Therefore, as immigrants, one should first heal oneself, make friends, love and unlove the ones as per the situation, stay in good mental health with courage, and be cautious around secretive people so that they can protect themselves as well as their dear ones. In a place where everything is new, the nervousness inside and the excitement create an energetic feeling that asks the mind to stay alert as well as calm.

Whenever we travel to a different state or country, the main problem is the language for communication. We try to communicate with a common language known by both, but sometimes it is not possible for everyone to learn the language. For reference, there are some immigrants like Jagjit who are not educated in English as a language, and their self confidence gets crushed. Without getting disheartened, it is important to overcome our flaws like Hameeda, who started to take “Adult *Angrezi* class for free, learning to read and write the American Language” (Divakaruni 227). These language barriers show us that this world is fragmented with multiple people with different mother tongue, but still everyone figures out ways to communicate. People all over the world have different mother tongues, but everyone prays for the same things: to find happiness and to survive with their own identity. For instance, on Saturdays, Tilo’s shop was found to be the busiest day of the week, and “All those voices, Hindi Oriya Assamese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other like notes from *tanpura*, all those voices asking for more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where” (Divakaruni 78). The shop of Tilo is a place where all the Indians come together to feel refreshed with the taste of their Indian culture. They had created a mini version of India where they felt at home. Home is an emotion for feeling safe, and all of them felt safer either coming to that place or after going back to their residence, where the spices played their roles in bringing peace into their lives.

Tilo, throughout the novel tries to build a bridge over the gap between the immigrants and the Americans. There are some characters in the story who have already been adapted to American culture, and some have made some hybrid ways to cope with the changes. For instance, Geeta has her own identity. She is a working lady, chooses her life partner, who is a foreigner, and at the end, with great effort convinces her family for the marriage. She has thoroughly adapted to the society on her own terms. Adapting to western culture does not mean ignoring the native culture. Geeta could have easily married her lover, but she chooses to get her family's approval so that they can share in her happiness, which is one of the most valuable Indian cultural traditions in which the happiness of parents is more important to children. On the other hand, the bougainvillea girls wore *salwar kameez* with Calvin Klein jeans, which is a hybridisation of Indian clothes with Western. The hybridisation process makes it a little easier for the immigrants to make themselves comfortable. The loss of identity begins when one is not sure of what they need and loses their courage. When someone has faith in themselves, then they can create their own identity in the crowd. The life of an immigrant is hard, but still, they can choose their paths like Geeta and the bougainvillea girls to survive. By getting a blend of western cultures and staying connected to the roots of the native culture, this mixture keeps the soul at peace.

When a person is distinguished from others, it establishes that person's identity. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan introduced the concept of the mirror stage, and this theory of his has a special place in this novel. The concept of the mirror stage proposes that a child between the ages of 6-18 months distinguishes between self and other. The child realises bodily autonomy for the first time. Tilo was forbidden by the Old One to never look at the mirror. She was not allowed to see her reflection. When she fell in love with Raven, she started to feel the urge to look at her in the mirror. She even bought a mirror but waited to see her reflection until the right moment. She was curious about what the mirror had to tell her. She actually did not want to see only her reflection but adhere by the given concept of Lacan so that she could distinguish herself from others and know that she is a talented and independent woman who really fought with every boundary that was set for her to help out her loved ones. The mirror is used as a symbol by Divakaruni to point out the identity issues faced by the immigrants. While building an identity, it is important to look inside oneself. The identity of a person doesn't change when the surrounding changes, though it gets affected by it, but the most important thing is to know about the inner self and what it requires. Relatively, it is necessary to look within the self to remember its worth. Everyone has their own ways of dealing with a situation; therefore, there should be a realisation that it is necessary for everyone to look within themselves to find their identity rather than looking up to others.

Tilo is constantly battling between her love and duty. She, as a saviour of the immigrants, was kept in a shell, within which she was bound to stay. As she says,

For as you know, when I woke in this land the store was already around me, its hard, protective shell. The spices too surrounded me, a shell of smells and voices. And that other shell, my aged body pressing its wrinkles into me. Shell within shell within shell, and inmost of all my heart beating like a bird. (Divakaruni 125)

She speaks as of a caged bird that leads a life of all comfort but is not really happy as per a free bird. She was trapped in an old woman's body, and her transformation to Maya, as a beautiful young lady, gives a reference to stay updated with the modern age. It is important for an immigrant to stay rooted in their own traditions and, with that, to stay connected with the changes outside so that their identity does not get affected from it. Tilo knew her responsibilities towards the immigrant and with that, she wanted to experience her life as per her own wishes. So as to not lose herself in this conflict by choosing between her role and love, she decided to stretch her wings, "to crack perhaps these shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the outside world" (Divakaruni 125). It frightened her a little, but it was important for her to save herself. If she had stayed abiding by the rules of the old lady then she might never have realised her self-worth. There are many who stay trapped inside such shells, afraid of getting out of them. Due to her rebellious nature, she was able to save the life of Haroun, understood Hameeda's love for him and helped them to confess their love for each other. She changed her attire to reach to Geeta's office to mend things between her and her family. She herself explored many places with Raven which was a totally new experience for her and at the end she successfully found herself along with the love of everyone including the spices who were initially angry on her as she had broken the rules of coming out of her shell. Taking her into consideration, it is important to come out of the protected shell in order to find ourselves.

The characters of the novel define identity in a simple manner. It is not always necessary to create a big image of oneself in front of others. It is important to stay connected to the roots or a set of principles and openly accept the changes around us. At the end of the day, everything comes together, but only if one starts to adapt the new things as soon as possible. Identity lies in realising one's own worth and to having faith in ourselves. Tilo realised that to perform her duties she has to come out of her boundaries, Raven finally understood that the earthly paradise he was searching for was actually forgiving his mother and starting a new life, Geeta's grandfather learned to accept the changes, Geeta fought for her love in fair means, Ahuja's wife escaped to become Lalita, who she really was, and Hameeda got Haroun. All of them found their lost identities and held their native country within themselves, creating their own space in a new land. Learning from and experimenting with these characters, Divakaruni reflects a path for each immigrant to find themselves.

Divakaruni puts the reader to think about giving up their comfort zone and having enough self-confidence to find their own identity. The hurdles in the lives will keep on being challenging, but a person with self-determination who has enough courage to overcome them can achieve success in the end. The greater the fear, the greater the desire to descend the stairs. To find oneself, it is primarily important to look up to others, and by helping them their good deeds will open up a beautiful path which will lead to an astonishing destiny. Each character in the novel shows different ways to reclaim one's lost identity, but Tilo stands out because she selflessly did well for others without considering the consequences. Taking the right decisions at the right time can change the life. This novel is setting an example for many that the right deeds will always have a positive result. To find ourselves, it is preferable to take the right path without causing harm to yourself or others.

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