



Home Away From Home: The Symbolic Significance Of Tilo's Spice Shop As Presented In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress Of Spices*

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, as a diaspora writer, has the obligation to record the traumatic process of acculturation experienced by immigrants, and she fulfils the obligation in an exemplary manner. The process of acculturation is made traumatic because of the demand placed on the individual to make compromises with their identity, and sometimes, embrace irrevocable changes to their very personality. Immigrants are made to first confront, and then comprehend and make compromises with an alien culture – the culture of the new land. This entails interacting with the culture of the new land for a greater part and it has given rise to the aspect of cultural identity in the immigrant life experience. This paper aims at understanding how individuals, especially the woman protagonist of the novel, *Mistress of Spices*, interact with the American culture in her quest for building an identity that would help her complete the acculturation process.

Cultural identity is formed by assimilating an individual's identity with the cultural system of the adopted land. During the assimilation process, the individual sometimes recognises the common characteristics that may appear between the individual's native culture and the adapted new culture. (Hall 223) Such recognitions allow the individual to progress further into the acculturation process, however, there is every chance that the individual will be baffled and, to some extent, threatened by the differences that might be found between the two cultures. When an individual is threatened by the conflict arising out of the shock created by the difference in the new cultural ethos, it causes anxiety and becomes a traumatic experience.

The immigrant individual is forced to negotiate with cultures in order to create a new identity which is often hyphenated. According to Homi K. Bhabha, it is essential to take into account the moments or processes that are formed during the articulation of cultural differences. These processes give rise to a state better perceived as a space of identity that exists between two extremes: The intersubjective and communal experiences of nationhood, community interest, or cultural worth are negotiated in the emergence of the interstices, which is the overlap and displacement of domains of difference. This is where the interstices come into being. Through action and interaction, the terms of the cultural engagement are created, which can either be friendly or hostile. (2)

The interaction between the two cultures, one native and one alien with the view to build an identity that would allow the individual to exist with the new culture becomes key in the very building of the new hyphenated identity. (Mishra 94) the interaction with culture in order to create a new identity (which is arguably already fluid as per the premises of postmodern thought finds a significant thematic concern in diaspora literature even though the negotiated identity creation with a compromise made with culture can be found even in postcolonial life experience. Divakaruni's novel, *Mistress of Spices*, for its thematic concern, highlights the immigrant experience of hyphenated identity constructed out of the interaction between culture and identity.

The primary focus of the novel, *Mistress of Spices* is the narration of the protagonist's life experience in interacting with culture to form the immigrant identity. The main character, a woman named Tilo migrates to the United States of America. The novel narrates her struggles to acclimatise herself to the new culture, confront and compromise with it alongside her Indian identity, and in the end acculturate herself as an Indian American. The struggle to acclimatise herself becomes all the more arduous for Tilo because of her strong longingness for her home, India. As a result, she holds on to her spice shop which she considers a home away from home. At the same time, there is the desire for acceptance among the society in the new land, and it is a constant struggle to experience both the longing for the old life and the desire for the new one. Tilo becomes a representative of all immigrants because of the overpowering nostalgia for the homeland. It is universal that the homeland and all that is associated with it gains a heightened (rather exaggerated) emotional entity for immigrants (Cohen 103). Tilo's empathy for her fellow Indians living in America reflects her indelible emotional attachment to the homeland effectively.

The novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, proposes a multilayered portrait of the life experiences of immigrants in America by amalgamating elements of dream, torment, dislocation, alienation, fight for identity and integration into the new conditions by the immigrant characters. These aspects are merged by the immigrant characters in Divakaruni's novels, especially in *Mistress of Spices*. The feeling of being uprooted has always been a part of Tilos's existence, even from her childhood. Therefore, the concept of displacement as a factor of identity is one that Tilo comes to terms with long before she is able to express it out. She learns to live with this idea as she learns to live with what is already there (Hall 45).

Tilo, who has moved from one place to another on several occasions, uses her magical abilities to help immigrants who are longing for a sense of connection to their birthplace at her spice shop. Tilo believes the spice shop to be her one and only home, and it is there that she nurtures and studies the cultural traditions of her own region. With the exception of Tilos' choice of Oakland as the location for the refuge, all other dispersions are outside of her control and do not have her approval. The main character is driven by the desire to feel as though they belong somewhere. And it is the agony that immigrants feel for their lack of community that leads to the sharing of group identity among them. It is obvious that *The Mistress of Spices* is an accurate portrayal of the immigrant experience since it suggests a sense of community feeling and connection that extends beyond the bounds of the family, all in an effort to create a home away from home.

Tilo is kidnapped by pirates from her town and taken away from her homeland. She eventually manages to break out from the pirates' grasp and makes her escape to an island, where she settled down after gaining her independence. As a result of her prowess in the magical use of the spices that are native to her homeland, under the tutelage of the Old Mother, Tilo uses the spices for the purpose of healing those in need. For this reason, she is appropriately referred to as the mistress of spices. Tilo not only escapes from the captors, but she also excels at the art of commanding and leading others. Tilo decides to move to Oakland, California, in the United States after completing her education to become a mistress of spices.

The decision to move to the United States is completely Tilo's decision. It is evident in the following words of hers: "Even before she spoke I knew its name, Oakland, the other city by the Bay. Mine (Divakaruni 55). Even before Tilo moves to the new city, the old mother warns her about the new place. She is aware of the struggles that Tilo should undergo in the new place, especially in her struggle to confront the new culture, and therefore she urges Tilo to choose another place preferably an Indian place: O Tilo,... I must give you what you ask for, but consider, consider. Better you should choose an Indian settlement, an African market town. Any other place in the world, Qatar Paris Sydney Kingston Town Chaguanas (55). In hindsight, it is proved that the old mother's words are not entirely irrelevant.

Tilo is the owner of a spice shop in Oakland, California, and she offers her clientele rare Indian spices along with spices that have been imbued with magical powers and help them recover from the hardships they are experiencing as a result of moving to the new land. It is almost as if the spice shop functions as a small version of India. It is quite fascinating to think about the fact that Tilo can only provide a helping hand to Indian immigrants because that is what the Old Mother advised her to do. This makes Tilo the architect of immigrant hopes in an alien land.

The mother cautions Tilo to only assist Indian immigrants in their time of need. Tilo is warned by her not to assist the others in any way. As a direct consequence of this, Tilo's Spice Shop evolves into a haven of refuge for Indian immigrants. Tilo fulfils her responsibility to safeguard those of her own kind in every way that is practicable. Tilos' home is the spice shop, and she has no trouble making herself at ease there. The shop stocks all of the spices that she remembers from her long-ago birthplace. The spices serve

as conduits through which the immigrant individuals can communicate with their native lands. "If you stand in the centre of this room and turn slowly around, you will be looking at every Indian spice that ever was - and even the lost ones - gathered here upon the shelves of my store ... there is no other place in the world quite like this" (Divakaruni 3)

The spice shop acting as a home away from home becomes a very important place for all immigrant Indians. It is the place for seeking solutions and solace from the harsh realities of immigrant life. All immigrants migrate to America with the dream to live a comfortable life. However, they fail to consider that the new land will be hostile to them and they will be suffering racial discrimination, segregation, alienation and indifferent treatment. It often becomes a shock to the immigrants and it causes traumatic experience (Cohen 7) as a result, the spice shop run by Tilo and her service to her community in a new land becomes all the more valuable.

Tilo has compassion for the less fortunate characters in the novel, including the driver Haroun, Lalita - Abuja's wife, Jagjeet, a Punjabi boy who becomes an alien to American life, and Geeta, the girl who loves a Chicano despite her family's disapproval, and Mohan, the boy who is severely beaten by some hooligans. Everyone with a problem visits Tilo in search of a solution and solace, and they never leave without receiving something valuable. The spice shop serves as a little version of India, a location where newcomers may communicate their troubles without fear of being judged. The immigrants are hoping that the owner of the spice shop will have a solution for them. Consequently, Tilos has devoted her entire life in the United States to guarantee the success of her own people and, in consequence, her country.

The commitment made by Tilo to her Indian immigrants is threatened when she extends her love and compassion to an American, Raven. She faces a quandary over the decision to create a relationship with Raven and still continues to serve her people from India. Here is when Tilo creates a hyphenated existence when she uses magic to bring about a compromise to her situation. Divakaruni combines the ancient and new interpretations of America to build her own rich, polyphonic discourse of lived reality based on facts, customs, superstitions, history, politeness, morality, and ideology. (Rajan 220)

Tilo appears to be a resident of an older magical realm, and both she and her appearance take the form of an elderly woman. Tilo, though, is able to foster the potential of modern comprehension within this older self of her. She has empathy for the struggles faced by previous generations of immigrants, as well as the current generation's frantic attempts to assimilate into American culture while ignoring their homeland's more traditional practices. Although the characteristics of the Indian immigrants Tilo meets in the host country are diverse, the overarching goal of becoming part of the dominant culture is consistent across the board.

Tilo is the mistress of Spices, which is one of the most crucial features that Divakaruni puts forth in this work. This is one of the most significant aspects that Divakaruni puts forward. According to Rajan's point of view, Divakaruni successfully accomplished the reversal of the colonisers' trade of spices by designating Tilo as the mistress of the spice shop. The re-entry route for Tilo, the postnational spice mistress, follows what was formerly the colonial spice route from west to east (with all of the concomitant orientalism) (221).

Tilos calls the spice shop that she owns and operates her home. It is almost as if she is carrying her house around with her and using it as a safe haven in which to spend all her time. Tilo falls in love with Raven, a Native American who is looking for spiritual solace and extends her love and affection despite the fact that she is only supposed to use her powers on members of her own community and culture. The fact that Raven's mother has lied to him causes him a great deal of anguish, and Tilo begins to feel compassion for his predicament and becomes associated with him as a result. She starts to take pleasure in being in his presence. In order to begin a new life, Tilo uses her magic so that her body might be transformed from that of an old woman into that of a youthful and beautiful one. Even more so, she makes preparations to shed her role as a mistress in order to start a new life with her American lover in the United States.

Tilo intended to start a new life in a new world with her lover; however, the devastation caused by the earthquake made her realise that her people require her assistance, and she cannot abandon them for an American. This shattered her decision to leave a host of people in their own conditions and begin a new life with her lover. But Raven understands and appreciates Tilos' decision, as they both adore the mysterious and exotic persona of the other.

The relationship between Tilo and Raven brings about, at long last, a synthesis of both Eastern and Western ideas and practices. Tilo has been given the name Maya, which is a name with roots in both India and the United States. After going by several different names throughout the course of the novel, including Nayan Tara, Bhgyavati, Tilo, and Tilottoama, the protagonist finally settles on Maya as her new name at the end of the book.

Maya is a name that is widely used in both of the countries that she is interested in living in. Tilo's home, however, is not in India as we know it geographically; rather, it is India as it is known in other countries; more specifically, it is her spice shop in the United States, which exemplifies India and is where bereaved Indians go to pay their respects. This highlights the complexities associated with home, homeland and the people who live there. In the course of the novel, Tilo tells Haroun, "I think I am returning home, Haroun, but is there ever a way back" (282).

Tilo discovers that the best way to manage her two personas is through discussion. She is unable to let go of her Native Indian heritage as well as her love for Raven. Similarly Raven is unable to abandon Tilo as well as his native American identity. A hybridised version of themselves is thought to result from their anticipated union as a couple. The Indian-American Raven recognises his contemporaries in the form

of the American Indian Tilo. Gita Rajan makes the observation that, with almost mathematical accuracy, the hyphens have cancelled each other out, which invites critical insight into the narrative of the text. The pairing of these characters on the same plane makes this observation possible. ... the deliberate combination of poverty and immigration is supposed to concentrate the reader's attention on what America represents today as the melting pot continues to resemble more of a bubbling cauldron (220).

The spice shop in the novel, *Mistress of Spices* becomes the home away from home for the protagonist, Tilo. It is not only a home for her, but it also becomes the home for all Indian immigrants who seek Tilo's help. As the novel progresses, the home expands to include other alienated individuals like Raven who is also an outsider who struggles to build an identity for himself. As a symbolic representation of the homeland, the spice shop becomes the centre of Tilo's universe in which she finds her anchor in her life.

Immigrant life is full of traumatic experiences. There is loneliness, alienation, the anxiety of new life, and especially the ordeal of acculturation. Any immigrant would definitely appreciate any help given by fellow Indians in an alien land. Therefore, the purpose of helping such lost souls is undertaken by the mistress of spices, Tilo. It should be noted that even though Tilo transform into Maya in course of her life experience, the spice shop remains the centre of her world, and even after her discovery of her love for Raven, and her attempt at creating a hyphenated identity, the spice shop remains the same symbolic representation of the homeland.

As a diaspora writer, Divakaruni has brought out the struggles of Indian immigrant women in her novel by narrating the life experience of Tilo. In creating the spice shop as a symbolic representation of a home away from home, the author skillfully brought out the predicaments of the immigrants. Besides this, she also brought out the hopes and aspirations, and expectations of immigrants in an alien land. In this regard, the spice shop that features in the novel, *Mistress of Spices* becomes a symbolic representation of home away from home for Tilo as well as her clients who seek her magical intervention to find solutions and so\solace to all their problems in life.

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