



An Expedition into Identity Intricacies at the Milieu of Immigrant Sensibility: An Excerpt

Aditi Abhishikta*

ORCID: 0000-0001-9534-257X

Department of English, BSH, BITS, Visakhapatnam- 530041 Andhra Pradesh, India

***Corresponding Author:** Aditi Abhishikta, adiherchild@yahoo.co.in,

Department of English, BSH, BITS, Visakhapatnam- 530041 Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract

Aim: *The purpose of this paper is to draw attention towards the concept of shifting identities in the postcolonial context by probing into the central character portrayed by Chita Banerjee Divakaruni in her literary narrative. The primary concern of this paper is to interpret the core realms of immigrant sensibility, identity intricacies, magical realism and psychological predicament at the backdrop of patriarchal mindset as well as feeling of alienation between home and exile.*

Methodology/Approach: *This paper is based on Psychoanalytic, Socio-Cultural, Thematic, exploratory critical analysis.*

Outcome: *This paper analyzes the expedition of an identity towards a liberated and self-asserted existence through the women protagonists in the fiction *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It has also examined the psychological predicament and struggles of the individuals, dealt with both the Indian ethnic roots and also with respect to the newly assimilated hybridized identity. The paper has highlighted the effects of the vicious web of conservative patriarchal attitude which ultimately leads to a splintered self.*

Conclusion and Suggestion: *The paper has made a bold attempt in showcasing the principal character's expedition that goes through a number of phases of her own expatriation, a good number of journeys which bring her close to adversity and devastation. The characters in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* seem to be original and insightful to change. This literary creative fulfills its very purpose of interrogating the self and the ramification of the changing role of what it actually means to be off-centered in the dimensional role of colonial Indian critic.*

Keywords: *Immigrant sensibility, expedition of identity, magical realism, identity intricacies, psychological predicament.*

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In the postcolonial context there have been various discussions on the concept of shifting identities. The highlight of emerging identities captures the central theme and a matter of great significance not only for the characters created in the narratives but the narrator whose sole purpose is to voice the difficulties or the tensions in their different materializations. The new paradigm in the periphery of postcolonial is important in providing the booklover with unique literature different from what was produced before the colonization. For instance, the “partial eyes” quite existent in certain writings (attached with the sense of questioning identity and invisibility), “most significantly...bear witness to a woman’s writing of the postcolonial condition” (Bhabha 53).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is a unique master piece that scrutinizes vividly the principle features of Tilo, the major protagonist’s development and also the milestones of her expedition towards a liberated and self-asserted existence. Tilo, with the passage of time is transformed into several identities and existences such as ‘Nayan Tara’ who could foresee the future, ‘Bhagyavati’ who could bring fortune to the pirates, ‘Tilotamma’ who could heal the suffering world with the magical power of her spices and finally ‘Maya’ her truly liberated self. In this journey of transformation Tilo has experienced her identity to be splintered in a dilemma between duty and desire. The novel showcases the psychological predicament and struggles of the individuals, dealt with both the Indian ethnic roots and also with respect to the newly assimilated hybridized identity through the character Geeta who is a second-generation immigrant. The writer has also highlighted the effects of the vicious web of conservative patriarchal attitude which ultimately leads to a splintered self in the character Lalita.

The women characters in the novel like Tilo, Lalita and Geeta are explored vibrantly in this research with special emphasis on Tilo being the major protagonist who has powers coming from spices. Matthew Strecher in *Journal of Japanese*

Studies (1999) defines magic realism as what happens when a highly detailed realistic setting is invaded by something strange to believe.

Divakaruni has successfully produced a perfect blend of magical and mystical realism with the help of spices. “Different spices may help us with different troubles” (*MS* 71). Vega-González in “Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor’s *Mama Day* designates the novel as one which examines into a “world of magic, myth, and fantasy amidst the realism of their daily existence” (2). In an interview with Marcus Morton Divakaruni states that the book is a metaphor and the characters are metaphorical but they are also realistic (1997).

Tilo’s character is recreated at the milieu of ‘home’ and ‘exile’ by Divakaruni not only in the context of topography and culture but also with respect to the human interaction, love, friendship and understanding. Similar transformation is noticed in Suniti Namjoshi’s *The Conversations of Cow* (1985) where the Cow who represents feminine reflection, undergoes several identities such as ‘Bhadravati’, ‘Baddy’ or ‘Bud’ in order to help the mankind. The past of the protagonist is unique and draws sympathy from the readers. Her birth is narrated with pungent recollection:

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 . . . Perhaps that is why the words came to me so soon . . . Or was it the loneliness, the need rising angry in a dark girl left to wonder the village unattended. (*MS* 7-8)

Nayan Tara is Tilo’s first identity being born to poor weavers in an Indian village. At the time of her birth “The mid wife cried out at the veiny purple cowl over my face and the fortune teller in the rainfly-filled evening shook his head sorrowfully at my father” (7). She was named Nayan Tara, star of the eye. But the

fact is her parents were disappointed “with fallen hope at another girl child” (7). She was a burden to them who considered her a dowry debt. She was fed with milk from a white ass as her mother was suffering from fever. She was deserted and wandering the village unattended with “no one caring enough to tell her Don’t”(8). While expressing her views on the position of women in a patriarchal society Simone de Beauvoir opines:

...since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race... (TSS 9)

Thus, the feeling of being alienated made her disdain from inside. “I felt disdain’(MS 9). At an early age Nayan Tara was gifted with supernatural powers to foresee the future which attracted many followers and believers making her feel rich. This gifted power fetched her special attention. But the love Nayan Tara received from her family was only a layer of fear. She is deprived of true family love and warmth. “My mother and father dared not voice their anger, for they were afraid of my power” (9). Aware of the state of discomfort and being fascinated by the childhood stories of pirates, she gives a calling thought and unfortunately her village is attacked by the pirates. Tilo is taken away by the pirates and who give her a new identity with the name ‘Bhagyavati’ (Queen of Pirates) the bringer of luck. Bhagyavati reflects: Father, sisters, forgive me, I who had been Nayan Tara, who had wanted your love but only won your fear. Forgive me, my village, I who in boresom and disappointment did this to you. (19)

Bhagyavati finds no comfort in her new identity even. She is with both devastation and self-annihilation more than before. “I want, I want, I whispered. But what I longed for I didn’t know, except that it wasn’t this” (21). She dives into the ocean advised by the sea serpents in search of an ancient ‘spice island’ ruled by

the First Mother where she can assert her true identity, making her existence worthwhile.

When Bhagyavati emerges from the water, she is transformed into a new existence which directs her towards self-assertion with a new name of Tilotamma or Tilo. Thus her identity is recreated and transformed from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati and then to Tilo. Nayan Tara indulges herself in the magical island of spices. She is fortunate to be one among the few who have got the consent of the Old one, an old woman, an ancient figure who seems to be the ruler of the island. Nayan Tara is trained by the old Mother making her able to follow the spell of the spices, hear their voice to be a true mistress. She goes through a process of purification, transmogrifying flame that is Shampati's fire. "...Shampati, bird of myth and memory who dived into conflagration and rose new from ash..." (56). Being trained as the mistress of spices she attains the cerebral, supernatural gift of corporeal and spiritual healing through the distribution of spices. When the time of departure came, every novice is given the opportunity find a new name, one that is significant in meaning as well as appropriate in its application. This is not just symbolical for the new identity as a mistress but for the protagonist it is completely a new identity in a new world. She chooses Tilotamma to be her new name:

...Til which ground into paste with sandalwood cures diseases of heart and liver, til which fried in its own oil restores lustre when one has lost interest in life. I will be Tilotamma, the essence of til, life-giver, restorer of health and hope. (42)

Tilo's prime intention is to relieve, heal her customer's suffering with the use of the magical spice, each having its unique purpose to be used. It is not less than the genius of Tilo to look into the lives of the subaltern population through her powerful psychic vision. The magical spices show their charisma in healing the pain of the sufferers but when used wrongly could also ruin its very purpose and have a reverse effect.

Being trained to be the mistress of spices, Tilo ventures into her new destination with a vow not to satisfy her own desire, not to touch anyone and not to leave her store anytime or her power shall have a reverse effect. The very meaning of her life was to dedicate to the cause of the spices. All what is expected of Tilo, is a sacrifice which is not new for women in a world of patriarchy and the restrictions applied upon her are the codes of conduct expected from her. Virginia Woolf has expressed “Anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation” (AROO).

With the responsibility of serving the community, Tilo, an Indian exile runs an Indian spice store in US. She has reinvented little India which claims of all the spices that ever were, even the lost ones. She says, “there is no other place in the world quite like this” (MS 3). The store fascinates a large group of people for whom the place is reminiscent of home, a little oasis in their diasporic lives encumbered with complications. Tilo feels that the Indians come to her store in quest of happiness. She finds herself now in a special space with which the ideas both of home and exile can be related, a space by who’s intangible, shifting and identical character the circumstances of her identity and also other immigrants’ identity is conditioned.

Through those who visit and revisit Tilo’s shop, she catches glimpses of the life of the local Indian expatriate community. To each Tilo dispenses wisdom and the appropriate spice, for the restoration of sight, the cleansing of evil, and the pain of rejection. There is a strong association of spice with desire and Divakaruni makes her principal on her way out of confinement, oscillate between ‘a lack’ and ‘an acquisition’ of these.

Tilo being catapulted to the society of Oakland in America with a grocery shop where she is unknown to others and others are strangers to her showcases a mixture of myth and reality. Her supernatural powers make her capable to dive into the inner lives of the immigrants getting the complete glimpse of their loneliness,

pain, suffering, struggle, persecution and hope in their lives. “all those voices... asking for happiness” (MS 78). The intermingling of Tilo’s supernatural power in comprehending the agony in other’s life and provide a healing cure not only provides an open ground for an insight into the contemporary American society but also brings us close to a number of possible suggestions and solutions to resolve the problems.

Among the tormented immigrants are Jaggi, the little Sikh boy, teased by his age group in school for wearing turban, Geeta, the Bengali girl who suffers being in between convention and modernity, fraught with her unsuccessful affair with American friend because of her parents’ attitude. There is also Ahuja’s wife trapped in the cage of arranged marriage with a man who is over aged, bald, unable to understand her feelings, whose concern is only bodily pleasures and wife for him is a property of inheritance. At her inability to conceive when the doctor suggests Ahuja to undergo treatment, he reacts to her, “*What are you saying, he said, I’m not a man? You want to look for someone better?*” (270) She is unable to overcome this horror as she experiences the infection of tradition and social expectations not different for Indians in America. “We carried them all the way inside our heads” (103). There is Haroun, the cab driver, who has a negative stereotype for American’s attitude towards Indians. His uncertainties and suspiciousness become reality one night when he becomes a victim of a racial assault by the frustrated American white boys.

The different layers of immigrant sensibility, anguish, fear, feeling of insecurity, apprehension and dilemma as projected in *The Mistress of Spices* is reminiscent, multifaceted and enduring. With the unfold tales of immigrant realities exposed to Tilo, the picture of self-identity appeals immediate urgency behind the curtain of marginalization. As every character individual undergoes the different facets of being an outsider, the intricacy of their solutions become quite apparent.

Lalita who marries Ahuja, an Indian working in America undergoes unaccountable agony. “Tears she cannot stop... Ahuja shouting when he returns home to her swollen eyes” (MS 15). Though she was not ready for the marriage, she was forced by the conservative social norms. “I didn’t really want to get married. I had a good life ... Still when my parents asked, I said, All right if you want” (100). Lalita had never seen her husband except in photograph which was quite opposite to what he actually was. Divakaruni depicts the Indian tradition of marriage where women have no freedom in selecting grooms of their choice. It also highlights the problems of traditional arranged marriage which compel wives to suffer silently, subjugated to harassment and sexual violence. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir:

Marriage today still retains, for the most part, this traditional form. First, it is forced much more tyrannically upon the young girl than upon the young man...she remains a servant of her father, of her brothers, or of her brother-in-law; she can hardly join the exodus to the cities; marriage enslaves her to a man... (TSS 450)

Lalita leads the life of a prisoner. She can be compared with Nazneen in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) where Nazneen is forced into an arranged marriage with a man considerably older than her and having low expectations from life. Nazneen’s life is not less than a prisoner like Lalita. Similarly Geeta, a daughter of the exiled Indians born to them in USA is reproached by her grandfather of her free behavior with men, working till late in the evening, dropped home by them and using too much of make-up. Things get worst when Geeta believing her parents tolerance, announces that she wants to marry her boyfriend. She meets with the absolute misunderstanding and even hostility and feels forced to leave her home. It shows bringing up teenagers in the Diaspora space is a difficult task. They become susceptible and defiant as they engage in activities forbidden by their cultural traditions. It is parents’ outlook, cultural norms, changing trends and the mindset

of the new generation who more or less become a part of such changes. Ranajit Guha in his article “The Migrant’s Time” in the Journal *Post Colonial Studies* (1998) asserts: To be in a diaspora is already to be branded by the mark of distance and as a result the immigrant becomes an outsider to his/her home country and also in his/her host country. (155)

It is exclusively through the ‘other’ that Divakaruni’s characters are able to come to terms with the borderlines of their origin and one-sided readings of one culture’s myths. They are competent of assimilating with the ‘other’ only after coming to terms with the ‘self’ as seen by their ‘home’ ethnicity. Divakaruni has focused about it in an interview in the following manner:

Having explored so many stories of women coming over here if wanted to explore another side of the diasporic experience; what happens to the next generation? That is very timely questions, because with the Indian community in the States getting older the experience of the second generation is becoming more important. (Bloomsbury Review 2004)

In most of the immigrant writings a conscious stream of thought is prevalent that grips the threshold of two existences. One is a real, vibrant, painful, often changing and the other one in the process of being identified and comprehended. The marginalization as a key point is often used by Rushdie as the figure of the narration in *Midnight’s Children* (1981), *Shame* (1983), *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) strengthens the characters with sympathy, pity, a better understanding and knowledge of the situations.

Tilotamma while experiencing the expedition of her own identity can be compared with Sufiya Zinobia in Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* (1983) who renders the experience of a country without being self-alarmed. She goes through a number of phases of her own expatriation, a good number of journeys which bring her close to adversity and devastation.

The characters in the novel *The Mistress of Spices* seem to be original and insightful to change. For Tilo it has been a long struggle to free herself from the grip of spices. This literary creative fulfills its very purpose of interrogating the self and the ramification of the changing role of what it actually means to be off-centered in the dimensional role of expatriate Indian writer.

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Dr Aditi Abhishikta

Dr Aditi Abhishikta is Assistant Professor of English at BITS, Visakhapatnam She is a poet, creative writer, classical vocalist, painter, soft skills facilitator and a motivational speaker. With a Doctorate in English Literature from Andhra University, she has to her acclaim more than 35 Articles, Poems published in Journals of repute, Edited Books and also presented papers in more than 30 National and International Conferences. She has been conferred with the Best Academician Award by Elsevier SSRN Research 2020.