



**DIASPORIC ELEMENTS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S  
*THE MISTRESS OF SPICES***

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Received: 21/01/17

Edited: 30/01/17

Accepted: 07/02/17

Area: English Literature

**Abstract:** *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the major Indian diaspora writers in English. She is the poet as well as novelist. She has won prestigious awards like American Book Award, Hackney Literary Award and Pen Syndicated Fiction Award for her contribution to literature. The underlying theme of her works is diasporic experience. This article aims to explore the diasporic elements in The Mistress of Spices. It mainly deals with diasporic experience of Indian emigrants Tilo, the protagonist, Laita, Haroun, Geeta and her grandfather, Jagjit, Shamsur and Hameeda.*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, Diasporic Elements, Chitra Banerjee, The Mistress of Spices.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the major Indian diaspora writers in English. She is the poet as well as novelist. She is the author of novels; *The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, The Vine of Desire, The Queen of Dreams, The Palace of Illusions, Shadow Land*, and the collections of poetry; *Dark Like the River, The Reason of Nasturitioms, Black Candle*. She has founded Maitri, a non-government organization, to help refugees. She has won prestigious awards like American Book Award, Hackney Literary Award and Pen Syndicated Fiction Award for her contribution to literature. The underlying theme of her works is diasporic experience.

This article aims to explore the diasporic elements in *The Mistress of Spices*. It mainly deals with diasporic experience of Indian emigrants Tilo, the protagonist, Laita, Haroun, Geeta and her grandfather, Jagjit, Shamsur and Hameeda. The diasporic writing is characterized by pulls and pushes, migration, quixotic life, cracked images, multiple identities, identity crisis, racial discrimination, ambivalence, nostalgia, displacement, adjustment problem, otherization, ghettoization, desire to be one with the adopted land, assimilation, in-betweenness, homelessness, liberation from shackles of customs of native country, empowerment, decentering the centre, decolonization, rereading, rewriting and reclaiming of native culture etc. *The Mistress of Spices* accounts both

negative and positive aspects of diasporic experiences.

Before exploring the diasporic elements in the novel, it is felt, a brief plot is necessary. The novel revolves around the protagonist, Mistress of Spices. She was born at an unusual time. It was dry season, paddy fields cracked; there was lightning, thundering, and heavy raining. Villagers took three days to put off the fire in the market place, mother lay with fever, cows ran dry, she was fed with milk of white ass, she was of mud colour and burden to parents. Worried parents called on an astrologer. Looking at the girl's horoscope the astrologer was shocked and surprised. He suggested naming her as Nayana Tara. She was born with an ability to sense where under the earth gold lay buried, could warn the village headman of the floods before they came and could direct the winds to blow favourably or unfavourably. She became a famous fortune teller, her fame spread across, people flooded from neighbouring towns, cities and mountains to change their luck with the touch of her hand. People brought costly gifts; she started using gold-woven cushions, mirror with frame pearl studded, ivory combs, ate with gold spoons in silver plates, grown up trembled and threw themselves at her feet, servants shivered at her orders, parents did not dare to voice their anger, travelling bauls sang her praises,

goldsmiths carved medallions with her images, thousands wore them for good luck, sailors carried tales of her powers.

The news of her power reached a pirate group which decided to kidnap her. The pirates of horrible look raided, robbed, and burned the village. Nayana Tara cried out all the charms she knew, resorted to calling thought, efforts ended in vain, so pirates bound her, killed her parents, carried through burning village and abducted. They took her to a far off place and named her as Bhagyavati. As calling thought began working she overthrew the chief and became the queen of pirates, led them to fame and glory, bards sang fearless exploits of pirates. She was disgusted with life there. So she wished to end it up, sent for another calling thought, sky grew black, terrible winds blew, typhoon approached, beneath water boiled, pirates screamed. She felt her body shattered and finally released, her heart filled with song of sea serpents that remain in coral caves during day time and come to surface only when Dhruva, star of the north, pours milk-light over the ocean and they saved her. The sea serpents told about the island of spices. They asked Bhagyavati to go with them to Samudrapuri. But she was drawn to the Island of spices.

When girls come to the island of spices for apprenticeship the First Mother or Old One examines their hands because it is the hands that call power out of spices. Hands must be neither too light nor too heavy, nor cold nor warm, when cupped against the sun, gaps should not be there between fingers, in the centre must be invisible imprinting of lily, and spices must sing. The First Mother found spices singing in the hands of Bhagyavati. So she took her to the Island. There were already several Mistresses of Spices undergoing apprenticeship. Bhagyavati was the most brilliant, skilful and loving of all to the First Mother. Mistresses of Spices master the powers of spices. If spices are wrongly invoked they will destroy them in a moment. Mistresses of Spices have to follow certain conditions namely they should not use spices for their own sake, should

remain in the spices-store, should not touch any human being, should not use mirror, should not love anybody except spices, should show neither more nor less concern for customers.

After the apprenticeship, before being deputed to different places Mistresses of Spices have to wade through the Fire of Shampati. They have the choice of either going to different places or remaining there serving the First Mother. They are also given names, thus Bhagyavati is named Tillotamma and sent to Oakland. At dawn she was there as an old woman in a store with all spices as if in dream. Several emigrants call on Tilo with their problems. Tilo diagnoses the causes for their problems and offers suitable spices to solve problems. Lalita, Haroun, Jagajit, Geeta and her grandfather, Hameeda, Shamsur and Raven are some of the persons approach her and get their problems solved. She loves Raven, gets a new name, Maya and lives with him.

The major diasporic element in the novel is multiple identities and resultant identity crisis and cracked images. Many characters in the novel have multiple names which exemplifies multiple identities. For instance, the protagonist has five names. When she was talking to Raven she said, "I too have had more than one. But only one of them is my true name" (*The Mistress of Spices* 152). She was named as Nayan Tara by her parents, Bhagyavati by the pirates group which kidnapped her, Tilo or Tilottama by the First Mother who had trained her in mastering the power of spices, Maya by Raven, an American, who loved her and the Mistress of Spices by the general public. Raven too has many names it seems. When he met Tilo at the Spices Store she asked him his name. He replies, "What name shall I tell you? I have had so many" (*MS* 152). Raven's mother too has two names. Her first name was Evvie but her later name was Celestina. It seems that Raven too had multiple names and this fact angers him. When Tilo asked him his name he replied, "What name shall I tell you? I have had so many" (152). Regarding his true name he said "I'm not sure I can tell which one it is" (153).

This signifies that diasporas acquire multiple identities for various reasons. Consequently, they experience identity crisis and their image is cracked or fractured one.

Another diasporic characteristic in the novel is migration or exile. In the broad sense the terms 'migration' and 'exile' are used as synonyms, though 'exile' has negative shade to it. Migration may be voluntary or involuntary. Most of the characters in the novel migrate; their migration is voluntary as well as involuntary. For instance, the exile of Nayan Tara from her birth place to the place of pirates is involuntary, whereas her migration from the pirates' place to island of spices and from there to Oakland is voluntary. The migration of Lalita from Khanpur to Oakland is involuntary. She was not ready to marry Ahuja and lead married life with him. Considering family's reputation and her younger sisters' future she went with Ahuja to Oakland. In Oakland also she did not have freedom and experienced torture by her husband. In order to get rid of it she went with members of an organization which came to the help of such women. Here her migration is voluntary. The migration of Haroun, Geeta's parents and grandfather, Hameeda, Shamsur, and Rehamansab is voluntary because all these people had come to the USA in search of job. The migration of these people, belonging to different regions, communities, castes and speaking different languages, gone to metropolitan centre in search of job exemplifies postcolonial migration.

The migration of these people is characterized by quixotic nature. The emigrants do not do a single job at a single place. They keep on moving from one place to another and changing their jobs. For instance Haroun after coming to Oakland did many odd jobs. First he worked in garages and petrol bunks. Then he became a driver of Mrs Kapadia and now he is the taxi driver of another Kashmirian. There is a chance of owning it in the due course of time. The narrator of the novel, Tilo, keeps on moving. From her place she had come to the pirates' place, from there she went to the

Island of spices. Again from there she has come to Oakland. In spite of warning by spices she has violated the conditions of being a Mistress of Spices and ready to go back to the Island of Spices as punishment for violation. From Oakland Lalita has gone to an unknown place and planning to set up a tailoring shop.

Another important diasporic feature is racial discrimination. Several characters in the novel experience the racial discrimination. For instance, Jagjit experienced brutal racial experience. His parents admitted him to a school. He was frightened to go to school because he knew only Panjabi. His teacher put him in the last row. The first English word he learnt is, '*idiot, idiot, idiot*' and the second word is '*Asshole*' (38). Even at night also "he lies with his eyes open" seeing "the jeering voices, the spitting mouths, the hands that pull pants down in the playground and the girls looking" (39). But with the help of Tilo who had offered him cinnamon 'which is the destroyer of enemies' provider of strength to legs, arms and mouth he could resist it. Migrated people are often attacked and cheated by natives. This is well expressed by Haroun. When he saw Tilo kept her store open late in the evening and permitted Raven to search something in the store he said "Ladyjaan, you must be more careful... All kinds of bad people roaming around this neighbourhood. Did you read or not in *India Post* just last week some man broke into one ...shot the owner. His name was Reddy I think. Just because he's dressed all fancy-fancy does not mean you can trust him. I've heard of men like that, dress up and pretend they're rich, out to cheat you" (111). One day Haroun was attacked by some people and got serious injuries. Rahman-saab says, "His kismet was good this time. Next time who knows. Looks like they used an iron rod. Skull could have cracked like snail shells" (230). Another Indian Mohan, maintaining a mobile food stall, was stopped by two white men who threw away the stack of paper plates. When he bent down to collect them one of them caught him into arm pit and squeezed him and another one spit at him saying, "soofabitch

Indian, shoulda stayed in your own goddamn country”(170). This incident affected him so much that “Mohan broken in body broken in mind by America”. As Tilo pointed out this is not the experience of only one but, “your story is story of all those I have learned to love in this country” (170). Even Tilo had feeling of racial discrimination. When she began loving Raven she doubted whether the white man loved her or not. After retirement as surgeon in Military Rahmansaab had come to Oakland to set up a clinic but very tough test were conducted to stop outsiders grabbing job opportunities of natives.

Though emigrants experience the racial discrimination, homelessness, adjustment problem their migration has empowered and liberated many of them. For instance, Hameeda was divorced by her husband as she could not give birth to male child. Her brother brought her to the USA and helped her to learn English and computer. Thereby she has acquired the ability to earn and to be independent. Her brother Shamsur came in search of a job started working as a chef in a small inn first, then in a big inn and shortly he will become a manager in a famous restaurant. Lalita, reluctantly came with her husband due to force by parents, thought of family reputation and her sisters’ future. She experienced a lot of torture by her husband. In a letter to Tilo, she writes: “I cannot write what else he did to me. It is too shameful” (270). In order to get rid of it she contacted people who come to the help of such people and got rid of him. They are ready to help her to set up a small tailoring business. Geeta had got very good education and consequently got a good job in a company. Thus several characters have got liberating experience.

Another important feature of diasporic literature is to reclaim native culture and rewriting it. It seems the main objective of the novel is to do so. The title of the novel itself underscores it. History is the witness that India has been known for its spices. The Mistress of Spices diagnoses problems of emigrants and offers suitable spices to end their

problems as physicians diagnose and prescribe medicine. Almost all who called on her got rid of their problems with the magical working of spices. Out of fifteen chapters, thirteen chapters are titled after Indian Spices. Through this, Divakaruni wishes to decentre the centre by providing central space to the marginalized knowledge system. It is like elevating the local to the global level and offering local solution to global problems. It also involves deconstruction and rejection of western cannons. By underlining and bringing to light the native natural solutions to emigrants’ problems, the author wishes to decolonize the minds of the colonized.

As Umaparameshwaran has pointed out the diasporic experience is not homogeneous rather heterogeneous. Depending upon the time of migration, job, earning, educational level and status the experiences of emigrants vary. The nature and experience discussed much in diasporic writing is of middle and lower classes. The experience of rich is hardly represented. Here in this novel the nature of rich emigrants is ironically presented. Out of curiosity the rich Indians too visit the store of Tilo. They come by cars “their cars gleam like waxed apples, glide like swans over the potholes outside my store....the rich Indians rarely speak, as if too much money has clogged their throats” (75). Some rich Indians crane their necks and lift their chins high because they have to be more always than other people, taller, handsomer and better dressed. Some rich Indians “send the lists because being a rich is a busy job” (76). They depend much upon their chauffeurs. The experience of Indian emigrants like Lalita, Haroun, Hameeda, Shamsur, Rahan Saab, Jagajit, Geeta’s grand-father, though seems to be homogeneous is heterogeneous.

Another feature of diasporic writing is conflict or in-betweenness. Most of the characters are caught between two ways of thinking; western and eastern. Emigrant parents strongly desire to give their children modern English education based on western model but expect them to follow Indian traditions. Consequently such children face the

problem of in-betweenness. Since they are born and brought up in host country for them that is the home. But their parents insist that their home-land is India. Willingly or unwillingly they accept it. Thus they do not have single home but multiple homes. For instance, Geeta's parents bring her up in Oakland, offer her good education, she has got A grades at all levels, till the completion of education she followed her parents' advice. But after getting a job in a company her attitude has changed. Her grandfather does not like her coming home late. He remarks, "If a young girl should work late-late in the office with other men and come home only after dark and sometimes in their car too? Back at Jamshedpur they would have smeared dung on our faces for that" (85). Geeta loves Juan and wishes to marry him. When her parents oppose it she leaves home. As everyone expects she does not go and live with Juan but stays with her friend hoping to convince and get the consent of her parents. Lalita faces the conflict if she should continue to tolerate the torture given by her husband or she should resist and give up her husband. Tilo also experiences conflict at various contexts. As the Mistress of

Spices, she is not supposed to touch the hands of any customer. But when Haroun comes and pleads to read his palm she faces conflict and finally takes his palm into her hands. She is not likely to go out of the spices store but when Geeta's grand-father requests her to go to Geeta's office to convince her. She is caught in conflict, in spite of warning by spices; she takes the risk and goes Geeta's office. So also she goes to the place where Haroun lives and offers him spices. She is not supposed to love anybody but she is drawn to Raven as equally as to spices. She is not likely to use spices for her own sake but in order to acquire attractive look she takes-in Makardwaj, the king of spices, acquires the desired look, goes out with Raven to his palace and spends a night with him.

The novel has, besides the above explored diasporic elements, many more diasporic elements. The novel throws light on several feminist issues also. It is known for its employment of narrative devices like the first person narration, non-linear plot, shift in time and place, flash back, magic realism, story within story, epistolary method, hybridity of language, intertextuality etc.

#### References:

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