

Life in the Diaspora: Growing up Cosmopolitan in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

A tale about duty and desire, conflict and reconciliation in the lives of the diaspora, is molded in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices. The present paper demonstrates the unevenness in the diasporic life showing the difficulty of the diasporic community, in a cross-cultural ambience, to reconcile with the conflicting entities of their life. Divakaruni epitomizes the spices, appearing emblematic throughout the novel, as the treasure of India, "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination." This research focuses on how the author depicts an altruistic character like Tilo, who struggles to harmonize herself with the shifting priorities of her life. Her ambivalent soul sways between her egalitarian sense of duty and bodily desire for love. In the midst of turmoil, Tilo settles her mind to "acknowledge the suffering" of all, substantiating that "the smell of charred flesh is the same everywhere." Finally, the paper concludes with showing how pertaining to "a double consciousness," the characters, negotiating with the nuances of their inheritance, grow up cosmopolitan, that is "vernacular" in nature, allowing "the local, parochial, rooted, culturally specific" one to live together with the one who is "transnational" and "transcendent."

Keywords: diaspora, cultural, cosmopolitan, hybridity

"I Tilo architect of the immigrant dream"

– *The Mistress of Spices* 29

The story of human migration is an age-old one. Either to search for food or for shelter, human beings have migrated from one place to another. Making their home in an unknown terrain is a phenomenon that our ancestors have followed and what we do even today. Perceivably, it is a never-ending process. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo is an imagination of diasporic identity. She is from India but lives in Oakland. According to Michele Verna, Indians constitute a very large number among other diasporic nations because of their legacy of colonial migration. However, the Indian community has migrated to different parts of South East and far Eastern countries even during the pre-colonial period to spread religious beliefs, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. James Procter observes that, in developing the idea of diaspora, many postcolonial critics have contributed to and challenged the "supremacy of national paradigms." From former colonies, people move towards the center of their colonial masters. Their identity is shaky, but they find the places of their former masters quite comfortable since they talk and behave like them. Therefore, this diasporic identity does not include the diaspora in spatial politics, rather they are being acculturated in the new cultural terrains. The second generation of immigrants forget their parents' cultural identity, find the confluence of heterogeneous cultures, and grow up speaking creoles. Then, the diasporic identity is a hybrid one.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is a narrative wrought with diasporic detail that reflects on the protagonist's duty in a foreign land. She serves as a spice mistress in "Spice Bazaar." Apart from that identity, she has others too. Though Tilo loves Raven, she is dutiful to others as well. She treats all equally and she cares about her duty. Her sense of responsibility binds her in an obligation to be less impulsive in fulfilling her dream. Tilo is placed in Oakland by the choice of "First Mother" and she caters to people of different communities there. People come to her to buy spices. Sometimes she suggests to her customers the spices that are conducive to the cures of their problems, and sometimes they look for spices to use as condiments. To Tilo, this catering of spices is a sublime duty that is considered a sacred one. She thinks that she has been blessed to assume the responsibility conferred on her by "First Mother." She has promised "First Mother" not to relinquish the spices at any cost. She will be profaned if she defiles the promise. Like an ordinary human being, Tilo also faces ups and downs in her life but she does not dishearten anyone, nor neglects the spices. She is not concerned for her own desires and pleasure; rather she takes care of the sorrows of others. She finds happiness amidst people. She hails from a rural India; however, the universality she imparts through her attributes accommodates her among the global community in a metropolis like Oakland. From a deplorable situation, she stands upright and makes Raven feel the pain of others. Both of them accommodate themselves with the imbalances of their lives and find their "earthly heaven" in a dilapidated city.

Nowadays, metropolises around the globe are becoming more diverse and multicultural. People from all spheres of life are there. Immigrants have found their homes there, particularly in the metropolises of Europe and America. The concepts of homeland and cultural identity have been obliterated due to the intrinsic nature of globalization. People, who are enjoying all amenities, often forget that they are deprived of the natural aspects of their indigenous way of living. Machines and devices operated by artificial intelligences are there to serve comfort and luxury in their lives. Observing the technological advancement, one may assume that human beings would soon be replaced by robots and algorithms. The inhabitants in these metropolises grow up transnational. Besides the native population, immigrants in those cities are also contributing to almost all sectors. In big cities, immigrants have little to do with their ancestral past; rather they assume a new identity. Far away from their homeland, they rebuild their home. Fluidity in their identity makes them transnational. Migration, once begun, never ends. They move from one city to another, moving their homes with them. Therefore, the idea of home becomes a constantly moving object and it is perceived that home can be built anywhere at any moment.

In today's literature, especially in Anglophone writing, the narratives of migration, displacement, loss of home and identity, nostalgia and isolation, are revisited constantly. Writers like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Agha Shahid Ali, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali, Amit Chaudhuri, Zia Haider, and many others like them are contributing to creating new dimensions in their narratives. They are immigrants or children of immigrant parents, and their writings have created what is now known as "migrant literature." This particular stream of writing incorporates narratives of angst and

struggle of first generation immigrants and the cultural fluidity of their children. Referring to Park and Rajan, Phillips, and Henry, Elleke Boehmer points out that “migrant literatures” show an inclination to gain the attention of readers because they “[bear] all the attractions of the exotic, the magical, and the other” promisingly in the discourses favored within a “globalized Anglo-American culture.” Boehmer also observes that the second generation of diasporic writers has “produced definitions of the postcolonial as almost invariably cosmopolitan” and this group of writers is contributing to a particular type of literature that is “conversant with the cultural codes of the West.” She has further stated that “the emergence of migrant literatures in many cases represents a geographical, cultural, and political retreat by writers from the new but ailing nations of the post-colonial world ‘back’ to the old metropolis.” The writers of migrant literatures have “developed what was anyway a cosmopolitan tendency” and their connections with their “Third World background have become chiefly metaphorical.”

These writers are “post-colonial intellectuals” and create such “themes” that consist of “postcolonial discourse.” However, in *The Empire Writes Back*, referring to Arif Dirlik, the authors say, “it is participation in the discourse that defines them as postcolonial intellectuals” (Ashcroft, et al. 196-7). This group of intellectuals, as Bill Ashcroft, et al. observe, continues to “engage the social, cultural and political effects of colonial discourse.” However, according to these scholars, there are two controversial features of postcolonial theory and they are “ambivalence” and “hybridity.” To them, moreover, both features have a particular relation in the centers of metropolises and in the postcolonial world. Bill Ashcroft, et al. further posit that “ambivalence and hybridity have continued to be useful amongst post-colonial critics because they provide a subtler and more nuanced view of colonial subjectivity and colonial relationships than the usual ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinctions” (206).

Postcolonial writers are dispersed both in the centers of metropolises and in the countries of their origins. They bring aspects of their third world background and feel associated with the cultures of the “Other.” They form a collective to preserve the culture of their native land. Nevertheless, they also embrace the cultural traits and linguistic aspects of their adopted land. Homi Bhabha includes his experience of migration in one of his critical essays titled “DissemiNation.” According to him, this dispersion of people from different identities is a gathering. Bhabha observes,

I have lived the moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures ... gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language; ... the gathering of the people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned. (291)

As Bhabha has pointed out, this gathering of people in foreign countries has diverse attributes. People, whatever their skills are, have started gathering in other nations for multitudinous reasons. They have left their countries of origin for their adopted homeland either for work or asylum. At present, a massive influx of people, especially of scholars, researchers, writers, and contributors in knowledge society, has occurred in the hubs of great educational and research

organizations. The differences in this gathering of diverse people have added a new dimension to the lifestyle of the Western world. Over the years, this gathering has formed a collective to give a multicultural identity to these people that have grown multiplicatively. Their next generation finds a home in the foreign land. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, for example, the name "Gogol" has not been adopted from any Bengali. Characters like Gogol, Sonia, and Moushumi intend to be bound with America. They have less connection with India, the home of their ancestors. Sometimes, many of the immigrants' progeny have not even seen their ancestral homes back in India. Their parents and grandparents recount the stories of a mythic ancestral land. From those narratives, they try to create images of their native lands, but those images are fragmented. What they could sense, therefore, has a two-fold effect on them: they see the ancestral land as mythic and exotic, but also a place of beauty and reality. As a result, a perfect orientation with their native, indigenous culture never takes place.

Referring to Stuart Hall, Bill Ashcroft, et al. has pointed out that "subjectivity" is not the important concern of diasporic identity but rather "subject position." Hence, diasporic writers tend to show the possibility of a change of identity. Divakaruni, who has authored a good number of fictions, is one of the prolific South Asian Anglophone writers. Like Ghosh and Rushdie, though she lives abroad, she has her origin in India. Her Indian past shapes her diasporic experience that helps her outline wonderful tales like *The Mistress of Spices*. In this narrative, Divakaruni recounts the nuances in the lives of diasporic people like Tilo, Jagjit, Geeta, Haroun, and Geeta's grandfather. Most of these characters are diasporic people and they have an ancestral origin in India. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, the raconteur of a diasporic past, is a spice mistress. She talks about her spices that have the magical, healing power. Her name "Tilo" is shortened from "Tilottama." In Hindu mythology, Tilottama is the "chief dancer in Indra's court" and Indra warns her not to "give her love to man – only to the dance." The name Tilottama derives from "til," that is "life giver." The spices that Tilo renders are not ordinary; rather they are special as each of the spices has a remedial value, and is not just a condiment for the foods of the people of different communities. The spice mistress is sincere to her duty and she is committed to serving the people. Through the rituals of "Shampati's fire," Tilo devotes herself to the welfare of the society. The Old One warns Tilo, saying, "Not cold and dry as the snake's belly, for a Mistress of spices must feel the other's pain ... for a Mistress must leave her own passions behind" (33).

The First Mother reminds her to emphasize on duty over everything. She warns Tilo that her desire must not triumph over duty. The foremost thing is to serve humankind. Responding to the First Mother's warning, Tilo promises, "I will not fall, Mother ... My heart is filled with passion for the spices, my ears with the music of our dance together ... I need no pitiful mortal man to love. I believe this" (45). Tilo's commitment reminds us that what we do in our life is sacred and deviation from that is profane. This is why Tilo surrenders herself to a sublime cause. She serves society for its betterment. People come to her with problems and she tries to find the solution. In some cases, she applies spices to remedy problems. Among her customers is an immigrant old man and his American-born granddaughter, Geeta. Ancestral culture, represented by the grandfather, and the culture in which Geeta has been raised cannot

be reconciled. Geeta's lifestyle is misconstrued by her grandfather and conflicts arise between the two as a result. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the bipolarity of shaping cultural identities is apparent. However, the convergence of cultures is not appreciated by the grandfather. In India, Geeta's lifestyle would have been circumscribed by patriarchy.

Bill Ashcroft, et al. point out that women "as colonized subjects" are subject to double colonization. "Patriarchy" is one of the forms of domination in third world countries where women are oppressed in all spheres. Geeta shares that cultural ancestry. In India, women have little to decide about their life. Culture influences one's lifestyle. According to Pramod Nayar,

Lifestyle is the distinctive style of life of particular social groups in a given age ... an individual's preference in clothing, food, leisure activities, automobile and housing ... the choice asserted by an individual is a symbol of her or his individual identity. (121)

The consumer culture and consumption behavior make people cosmopolitan. In western society, Geeta has an orientation with the cosmopolitan lifestyle. In this novel, the Orient meets the Occident, and Oakland becomes the place where Eastern and Western cultures mingle. Amidst that convergence, there is a conflict. Geeta finds a non-Indian friend, Tilo meets Raven, Jagjit accommodates himself with the boys who used to trouble him. However, there is a mystery and a lot of misgivings about how accepting of each other's cultures people are.

Referring to Chirol, Edward Said observes that "Orient and Occident are irreducibly opposed to each other, and that the Orient ... is one of 'the great world-forces' responsible for 'the deepest lines of cleavage' in the world"(253). This Eurocentric mindset is, however, perhaps one of the main reasons of the split between East and West. The contrast between the people of the East and the West is latent in body colors: "White Occidentalism" and "colored Orientalism." Thus, to Raven, Tilo is a "mysterious Indian beauty." Then Tilo says,

American, it is good you remind me, I Tilo who was at the point of losing myself in you. You have loved me for the color of my skin, the accent of my speaking, the quaintness of my customs which promised you the magic you no longer found in the women of your own land. In your yearning you have made me into that which I am not ... Perhaps I have done the same with you. But how can the soil of misconception nurture the seedling of love? (309)

What Elie Faure says is derogatory and shows a condescending view to the people of the Orient. According to Faure, Said notes,

Orientals' bodies are lazy ... the Orient is essentially mystical ... unless the Oriental learns to be rational, to develop techniques of knowledge and positivity, there can be no *rapprochement* between East and West. (253)

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni delineates the unevenness in diasporic life. According to Joel Kuortti, diaspora is a "loaded term" and "popular term." The term attracts diverse "phenomena" and Kuortti points out that diaspora indicates a "matrix of diversity" and, therefore, is a place of "hybridity." Therefore, hybridity constantly interrupts the longstanding

binaries, East/West, colonized/colonizer, dominated/dominant, suppressed/suppressor, and so on. People from ex-colonies are moving towards the center of their rulers. This migration from eastwards to westwards and vice versa obliterates the distinction between the people of two distinctive cultures. The modern migration, therefore, gives the people in perpetual flux a diasporic identity. Stuart Hall says that “diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (qtd. in Kuortti 4). The diasporic people have influence of their native cultures even in their adopted lands. They cannot completely assimilate themselves into the culture of their adopted homeland, nor can they embrace all aspects of their native culture. As a result, they are always in search of a new identity that will define them, yet make them distinctive. They attempt to forget their colonial past and reshape their mind with the values of their native cultures. The diasporic writers reflect on the values of their native cultures and bring the artifacts produced at the location of their origin. Thus, they try to get rid of the influence of the cultures of their adopted one. Mentioning Fanon, in this regard, Boehmer observes that “the colonized had to ‘insult’ and ‘vomit up’ the white man’s values.” Boehmer has pointed out:

Culture ... was chosen by Fanon ... as a foremost arena of transformation, a site where psychological and spiritual freedoms might be won. ... Mobilizing the enduring strengths and insights of their own communities, those which had withstood invasion and occupation, they would be able to eject the colonizer’s presence and change their lives. (175)

Diasporic South Asians are very large in number in Europe and America. Among the South Asians, the Indian diaspora has outnumbered other South Asians. These Indians in faraway lands have shown their multicultural identities through their culture, food, languages, lifestyle, and so on. However, they are identical in many ways. Many of them, though taking many aspects from their adopted countries and enjoying all the splendor of first world countries, feel a connection with their native land. This Indian diaspora is at the juncture of advancement and success since the Indian community is contributing significantly to different sectors. To accommodate them in the cultures of their adopted countries, they sometimes have to comply with some aspects their adopted countries’ cultures. In this regard, Kuortti claims that they are not simply absorbing themselves into the cultures of their adopted countries, they are rather “reshaping them through their own, new voices.” Thus, the author asserts that these diasporic writers and their writings deal with the issues of “violence, adaptation and racism” (6). Like other diasporic writers, Divakaruni also deals with the issues of conflict and adaptation in *The Mistress of Spices*. In this narrative, it is manifest that Geeta’s grandfather, who is orthodox in his belief, is shattered by the western lifestyle and he has some reservations in accepting everything. As a result, both Geeta and her grandfather quarrel over petty issues. Therefore, the grandfather’s life is stressed in America since it is bifurcated into two streams. Moreover, Geeta’s grandfather is so obsessed with his native Indian culture that he wishes to keep Indian traditions intact in a foreign land which makes their familial life more complicated. The intensity of unhappiness in the grandfather’s life is evident in the following conversation with Tilo:

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 in Jamshedpur they would have smeared dung on our faces for that. And who would ever marry her?

But *dada*, this is America after all, and even in India women are now working, no, even in Jamshedpur.

That girl, this Sunday she cut her hair short-short so that even her neck is showing ... how much makeup she is using all time. *Uff*, in my days only the Englishwomen and prostitutes are doing that. Good Indian girls are not ashamed of the face God is giving them. (88-89)

Geeta's grandfather possesses a traditional view of her marital affairs as well. He conforms to Indian customs so rigidly that even thousands of miles away from his homeland, he cannot accept his grandchild talking about her love in front of her parents. In Indian society, it is taboo for children to talk about their own marriage and love in front of their family members. This tradition is entrenched so deep in Indian culture that a change is almost impossible even so far from their ancestral land. Behdad writes, "diaspora identity is celebrated ... while ethnic identification is devalued as a monolithic and static phenomenon incapable of variation and transformation" (396-409).

Tilo helps in reconciliation. Sensing the stalemate situation between Geeta and her family, Tilo meets Geeta. The encounter between them is interesting.

Your grandfather loves you a lot ...

Love, hah ... He doesn't know what the word means. For him it's all control. Control my parents, control me ... What the hell did he think you could do, anyway?

Nothing really ... Just let you know that angry words like buzzing bees hide the honey underneath. Just see you so I can go back and tell them 'Don't worry so much, she's well.' (143-4)

Like Geeta, Jagjit also struggles as a lonely boy in a foreign culture in America. The son of Punjabi parents, he has learned his first English word: "idiot." Moreover, he is "shy-eyed" and a victim of teasing at school. In the playground, kids pull his turban off his head and make fun of his long, uncut hair. He is humiliated and hurt, but he does not make any sound when he cries, suppressing it by biting down on his lips. The humiliation discourages Jagjit from going to school. Tilo, the spice mistress, selects cinnamon for him because it has the quality to make friends and give him the strength to intimidate his enemies. She explains it is

to find you someone who will take you by the hand, who will run with you and laugh with you and say See this is America, it's not so bad ... to give you strength, strength which grows in your legs and arms and mostly mouth till one day you shout no loud enough to make them, shocked, stop. (42)

Here, Divakaruni intends to carry the message that America is a country which embraces people of diverse cultures and identities. Like her characters, Divakaruni is also an immigrant and has perhaps gone through some of these experiences. Jagjit, a Punjabi boy, has come to America with his family and the new home has a multicultural background. America's metropolises have the quality to embrace people regardless of their cultural identities. All inclusiveness of this country gives spaces to both good and ugly things of life. Thus, the transformation of Jagjit is common. He transmutes himself into a different person. He makes friends in school. Then he says,

They're like my brothers, better than my brothers ... They listened when I talked and didn't laugh. They taught me how to fight. Pointed out the soft fleshy parts where it hurts most. Showed me how to use elbow knee fist boot keys and yes, knife. And in return, so little. Carry this packet here, drop off this box there. Keep this in your locker for a day. Stand on the corner and watch for. (127)

This indicates that America has everything to spoil a meek and mild kid like Jagjit as well. Therefore, the writer says that he is captured in "the gold jaws of America" (257).

Tilo has a mission, an assignment given to her by the First Mother, to serve the community. She promises the spices, "In spite of America, in spite of love, your Tilo will not let you down" (152). However, Tilo surrenders herself to her desire for love. She can read minds and thus she can see what Raven is thinking. Raven does not say anything to her, but Tilo reads his eyes that speak all of his words:

Only the gladness in his eyes telling me he saw something more important than my wrinkles ... And for the first time inside his mind I caught a swaying, like kelp deep undersea, almost invisible in salt shadows. A desire. I could not read it yet. I knew only that somehow it included me. (156-7)

The culture of immigrants' country of origin is different from that of the adopted country. Mentioning Jan Mohammed, Nayar says that immigrants are "standing at the border of two cultures, looking critically at both, neither assimilating nor combining either of them" (179). According to Galvan, the identity of these diasporic individuals is "the hyphenated" or hybrid one. It is formed just like "a peasant or farmer sowing the land, dispersing seeds at random, these seeds falling in different places and producing hybrid fruits." Thus, almost all the big cities in the West are a hybrid society. Galvan also mentions that this dissemination of people in different geographical locations is a recent phenomenon, especially triggered immediately after the Second World War when many colonies became independent. Referring to Bhabha, Galvan notes the number of that population living outside their homeland is 100 million. Thus, the migrant population is segmented and dispersed in different geographical locations. Galvan also points out:

Diasporic migrants are necessarily fragmented, as they have been dispersed and torn away from their country and fellow citizens ... What the Indian writer in the diaspora to Britain does, then, is to 'create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible

ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind'. Fragmentation, which initially might be seen as a weakness, thus turns into strength, allowing the writer to imagine his past, giving him more freedom to create and to recover the lost time, the lost home. (116)

Thus, in *The Mistress of Spices*, most of the characters have a Third World background. With their background, they try to flourish. To prosper, they need to assume diverse situations. They have to go through changes in life. Like others, Tilo has to go through changes. She has four names in four different stages of her life, from "Nayan Tara" to "Maya," and her cultural background with a description of rituals like "Shampati's fire" set a connection between Tilo and a land of mysticism. That land of mysticism is India, one of the cultural hubs of the Orient. In India, people worship the snake goddess, Manasha, and, therefore, the narrative yields to a description of snakes. Even though Tilo grows up cosmopolitan, she is a nature lover and she loves creatures like snakes as well. The presence of primitiveness in that description leads the readers to a state of mind that helps them draw a contrastive picture between the East and the West. The benevolence of the snakes saves Tilo's life. A nature-loving Tilo is caught by the dream of love and later she comes back to the dilapidated city with Raven to reform it after the havoc takes place. The First Mother persistently warns Tilo not to dream of love: "Don't let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don't rouse the spices' hate" (148). Though Tilo makes a promise to the spices, she breaks her word. However, Tilo loves Raven and Raven loves her. At the end, though Tilo's soul sways between her egalitarian sense of duty and bodily desire for love, she maintains a good balance between them. In the midst of turmoil, Tilo settles her mind. She realizes that "the smell of charred flesh is the same everywhere." Thus, pertaining to "a double consciousness," the characters, negotiating with the nuances of their inheritance, grow up cosmopolitan that is "vernacular" in nature, allowing "the local, parochial, rooted, culturally specific" one to live together with the one that is "transnational" and "transcendent" (Werbner 109).

This paper finds that characters like Tilo, Jagjit, Geeta, Haroun are of "hyphenated" identities and they grow cosmopolitan in their nature. Though, initially, they face difficulty in maintaining congruity with the nuances of their inheritance, they flourish at the end. Assimilating two cultures simultaneously is challenging for Tilo since devoting herself only to spices carries her Indian identity that discards her present one. Thus, declining her American identity is imperceptible to her; rather she assumes an Indian-American identity. Hence, despite her promise to the First Mother, she prioritizes Raven over spices. At the end, the paper has found that Divakaruni unveils the dream of immigrants in this novel. East meets West and the confluence of both is a reality. This paper concludes with the assumption that this convergence is a promising one. Oakland, a metaphoric place in this novel, is compared with heaven where Tilo and Raven consider living to ignite their most humane spirit.

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