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Identity Question in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract:

Identity is the projection of self. It is generally formed through a series of accidental accumulations. Everyone has a separate identity, for instance, an individual has childhood impressions and identity. He has an identity as a man, a husband, a professional and so on. Self image transform self identity. The present research attempts to focus on quest for identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Divakaruni depicts the problems of immigration and cultural identity crisis in the novel. The paper discusses these with a critical analysis.

Keywords: Identity, Culture, Gender, Crisis

Diaspora Literature includes a thought of a homeland, local area and journey from local to non-local area. Diasporic writing is full of feelings of migration, sentiments of estrangement, and love for the native country. It provides us about a twofold recognizable proof with the first country, quest for identity and freedom, ancient stories, mythic thoughts and dissent against segregation in the

adopted country. Diaspora writers mainly focus on the identity of immigrants. Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams say that "Identity as people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (2). In connection to this, Stuart Hall rightly defines: "Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the other to oneself" (9). Without identity, human beings are not possible to exist in the society as it is self reorganization. Alexander Wendt observes identities are "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self" (397). There are many writers who poured the themes related to immigration, identity, and quest for freedom. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among from them. She is a diaspora writer. Her major themes center on her wish to examine the identity of South Asian women. Like the works of Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, and Jhumpa Lahiri, the works of Chitra also deal with identity, migration and diaspora. She helped numerous immigrant women to cope with new culture by establishing a helping hand for the South Asian women named 'MAITRI.' She published poetry, short fiction and novels. In an interview with Erica Bauer, she says:

I really like using different forms of writing – each form has its own strength. To me poetry focuses on the moment and in images, it feels like an intuitive form of writing. Recently I've been writing more fiction because I'm interested in exploring relationships and showing the differences that develop into characters. (1)

Divakaruni's famous collection of poetry is: *Dark like the River* (1987), *Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990) and *Black Candle* (1991). These poems express the themes of love, marriages, domestic violence and immigration. Her first novel *The Mistress of Spices* was published in 1997. It is a unique novel in which we see the features of prose and poetry. Related to this novel, the writer says: "I wrote the book in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the

timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable" (1). The novel deals with the magical powers of an imperishable woman Tilo. She starts from the spice island and runs a supermarket in inner-city Oakland and utilizes spices to help the Indian settlers and immigrants with defeating troubles. The novel is mythical and mystical. Indeed, it is an evocative of fables and fairy tales. Divakaruni explains the story in transporting. Amy Tan says that the novel is a dazzling tale of "misbegotten dreams and desires, hopes and expectations, woven with poetry and storyteller magic." Her main character migrates to the United States of America. She has shown her struggle as a non-local resident including the cultural quest also. She herself writes in her blog:

Sometimes I'm asked if I would have become a writer if I hadn't moved to the United States. I don't know the answer to that question. I do know, though, that I couldn't have written the same kind of stories, hybrids born out of the melding of the Indian and American cultures. (How 2013)

Immigrants need to change themselves mentally. It is not possible thing to forget one's culture and language as these involve in one's mind and body. Without any invitation, they come out easily in communication. In connection to this, Vanjulavalli remarks: "When people migrate from one country to another, many changes occur in their lives. One of the significant changes is assimilation which happens first and foremost as soon as they step into the western or foreign country. Immigrants transform themselves in many aspects" (87). Divakaruni's writing has come late in life and it is directly tied to her migrant experiences. In an interview in the *San Francisco Examiner Magazine*, Divakaruni says that "being an expatriate made me what to write because it is such a powerful and poignant experience when you live away from your original culture and this becomes home, but never quite, and then you can't go back and be quite at home there either, so you become a kind of outsider to both cultures".

The novel is a mystical tale told by Tilo, a businessperson born in India. She is a young woman in an old woman's body who is well trained in the secret powers of spices. She assists clients with fulfilling their requirements and wants with the otherworldly properties of flavors. She has the power to see into people's hearts and minds. She emotionally involves with her customers. The writer has shown American racism here. As Laura Merlin in a Review in *World Literature Today* states, "Divakaruni builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American society that lies between the self and the community. Addressing the immigrant experience in particular, she asks how to negotiate between the needs of each under the earth moving stress of desire" (207).

Tilo like Bharati Mukherjee's main characters from her novels *Wife* and *Jasmine* has the identity crisis. These Indian women suffer from identity in foreign land. Tilo meets some people who help her. She applies magical power on Lalita, Ahuja, and Geeta. Tilo, an immigrant from India, runs a spice shop in Oakland, California. The store has the inner room with its sacred and secret shelves. When she happens to see the customers, she used to raise questions related to their problems. "Remember" said the old one, the first mother, when she trained us on the island. "You are not important. What is important is the store. And the spices. The store even for those who know nothing of the inner room with its sacred, secret shelves, the store is an excursion into the land of mind-have-been" (5) so the customers used to felt shocked and call her a 'Witch Woman' (6). They keep their alert expense away from her yet they will return later to her. At the point when they return, she will bring them into the internal room and will illuminate the light and chant. She will pay to eliminate pity and sufferings as the Old One educated. Tilo left the island precisely for this reason. Elizabeth Softky points out that for Divakaruni, "Tilo is the quintessential immigrant- she must decide which parts of her heritage she will keep and which parts she will leave behind" (26).

Tilo's life changes when she falls for an American man named Raven, whom the novel unequivocally suggests is Native

American. She can't read his inner thoughts. Lamentably, she decides to ignore the guidelines of her preparation in her quest for sentiment and her choice to search out customers outside her shop, which brings about the flavors' disciplining her and those she thinks about. To spare Raven from being another victim of the flavors' amazing magic, she chooses to leave him following one last night where they have intercourse. Subsequently, she acknowledges the discipline for dismissing the guidelines of her preparation, which brings about the store being destroyed in an earthquake. She and Raven accommodate and choose to help rebuild the shop.

Tilo is left unattended, however Nayan Tara, as she is named before long gets the consideration of the residents because of her quality to foretell future. This made pirates to attack the village and take Nayan Tara with them. They named her Bhagyavati and soon Bhagyavati deposes the Pirate King and gains the position. Before long she tired of this lifted up position and arrives at the old island. There, she meets the Old One who is likewise referred as the First Mother or Old Mother. Tilo learns the indulgences of flavors and shipped off Oakland. Tilo is a healer and spice seller and through her psychic forces she analyzes her multiethnic and multigenerational customers' physical and mystic disease with the assistance of her mystery flavors. During the time spent this treatment, she creates problems of her own when she falls in love with a non-Indian Raven.

Tilo needs to pick whether to serve her people or to follow the way prompting her own satisfaction. Tilo has to choose which parts of her legacy, she will keep and which parts she will decide to surrender. Toward the finish of the novel, Tilo is renamed as 'Maya' torn between the human love of her man who needs to move with her to the 'earthly paradise' and interminable life and information by getting back to her function as a network partner. Thus Divakaruni deals with a variety of issues in the book, including racism, migration, freedom, love, and marriage. As Velmani says, "Divakaruni combines the unfamiliar, the female

Indian immigrants experience with the familiar urban life in America, blending the two into a magical narrative that relates a gifted young woman's plight as an outsider in southern California as a *Mistress of Spices*" (176).

Ahuja's wife is young and seems ever younger. She comes into Tilo's store every week. She buys cheap rice, dal, and a small bottle of oil. She has a name Lalita as it suits to her soft beauty. She is never referred to by her real name. She was called by her husband name. Her story is the story of married women. Even though she didn't like the bridegroom, she married her because of not opposing the Indian traditional norms. He, a tyrannical man, came from America. She married her and left her dreams. Like many feminist writers, Divakaruni has also shown how the married women get the identity crisis.

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