

Dilemmas of Uprooting and Rerooting with reference to the character Tilo in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress Of Spices*

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni a diasporic writer is an Indian-born American immigrant. She plays a vital role in posturizing the dilemmas of the diasporic community. She was born in Calcutta on 29 July, 1956 in a Bengali Hindu family. She migrated to the United States of America when she was nineteen years old. She received her Ph.D., in English on Christopher Marlowe from the University of California. She is also a teacher of Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Divakaruni's real mission of writing is to dissolve the boundaries between countries and extend mutual respect and peace towards people of various countries. Her literature has a diversity of concepts such as Feminism, Transnationalism, and Multiculturalism with notions of exile, post-colonialism, and diasporic experiences. A deep analysis of Divakaruni's works substantiates her as a strong diasporic woman who proves that 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world'. She is the former president of Maitri, located at San Francisco a helpline for South Asian women, dealing with domestic abuses. She is the epitome of success to the whole diasporic community to live a balanced life at any critical situation. She has won covetable honours and awards.

Indians have been migrating to various parts of the world since time immemorial. It is the need of the hour to study diaspora analytically for valid reasons, to know the psychological and sociological changes in the lives of the immigrants.

Diasporic movement is dislocation and relocation of cultures. Diasporic writings' distinctive topographies are the quest for identity, uprooting and rerooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, assimilation, acculturation, and adaptation.

This paper analyses the voyage of the immigrants to the west and their challenging life in an alien land. The twenty first century has become a global village and with technological and travel advancement, criss crossing the global village has become a regular affair. Crossing the Atlantic is associated with financial benefits and hence many eastern citizens dare to cross the seas knowing it would lead to unendurable conflicts. Settling in a foreign country entails, disturbing the mind, body and soul of the people who are rooted to their tradition and culture. In other words one has to uproot oneself to drift along in the target culture and tradition.

Drifting negates stability and therefore he or she has to consciously reroot himself or herself in the foreign country. Consequently the body gets rerooted in the foreign culture but the mind and the soul frustratingly refuse to get rerooted; so the process of rerooting becomes incomplete and hence the rise of innumerable conflicts.

Immigration to the foreign countries is always highly challenging to the immigrants, as Divakaruni says: “Moving to the United States really made me renegotiate my boundaries and in some ways, even reinvent myself as a woman” (Art of dissolving boundaries n. pag.). To highlight the difficulties of uprooting and rerooting, Divakaruni’s life can be taken into consideration. Divakaruni’s real purpose of her migration was to take up her studies in America. Though the migration is her own choice she struggled to uproot herself from the known traditional customized country. Her initial stage of rerooting in America was also a traumatic journey. Divakaruni says in one of her interviews that:

It was a big adjustment, moving from a big city like Calcutta to Dayton, Ohio, which, at that time, didn’t have many Indians and was not cosmopolitan; I felt a real sense of being “other”. People were so startled to see an Indian person in Indian Clothes I think all people come to a new country with preconceived notions. (Responding with Hope to 9/11 n. pag.)

Divakaruni’s writings focus much on the conflict between the traditions of her homeland and the culture of her adapted country and this in turn makes her an emerging literary celebrity in the United States. She became a writer since it is the only way, or tool she can use to fight for her self-identity. She is a connector of boundaries and cultures as she had faced cultural conflicts in her personal life.

All immigrants would experience their bittersweet memories about their past and homeland which bring happiness in them. Nostalgia appears to be a longing for a desirable place, which can also be viewed as

yearning for a different time, which may be the time of one's childhood, the recollection of dreams and memories. Transportation is considered an important life transition for the immigrants, their migration takes place for different purposes and is accompanied with profound losses which make them face psychological imbalance and challenges. It is significant to note that a discussion on nostalgia naturally brings a link with Diaspora which has multiple layers of meaning in the Modern era. It is mostly used now as a synonym for migration, emigrant "exile" and expatriate. The question of home and homeland is a constant concern of immigrants of which nostalgia is the inherent result.

The impact of nostalgia on the individual characters varies: some characters are dominated by nostalgia and some overcome or manage nostalgia and some others do not allow themselves to be ruled by nostalgic feelings. They are categorised as characters who are afflicted with pains of notable or dominant nostalgia. These characters suffer a lot in the host country, their longing for the past and homeland will mess their present life and at times some even take the extreme step of going back to their homelands. The second category of characters are those who undergo manageable nostalgia, who focus on their work and know to balance their life in the host countries, though some incidents and past trigger their memory with nostalgic feel and the third category of characters are those with negligible nostalgia. These characters are easy goers because they never think of their homeland and keep themselves far from their past and never allow themselves to be struck by the sentimental feelings about their stay. Wherever they are they wish to enjoy life to the core.

First and foremost Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* centres on the immigrants who become outsiders to their homeland and also to their host country. The central character of the novel is Tilotamma who owns a spice bazaar in Oakland. Tilo is a mysterious, magical woman who learns the magic of Indian spices in an island. She is also a renowned mind-reader and foreteller. She recalls her past and says that she is one among the three girl children to her parents and was considered only a dowry debt by them. D. Ebina Cordelia who highlights the position of women, who are treated as burden and second grade beings, says "Parents abort their child when they come to know it is a girl baby. This is true of not only for ordinary women but also for Tilo, who has got magical powers" (2).

Fortunately Tilo has the talent of foretelling, and prediction which brings wealth to her and her family. Her unique talent spreads its wings across various lands and so people from different countries visit her to know their future. She proudly declares: “I, Nayan Tara, the name which also means Star-seer. My fame spread. From neighbouring towns and beyond, from the cities that lay on the other side of the mountains, people travelled so I could change their luck with a touch of my hand” (8). She blows her own trumpet and gets trapped into trouble by sending a calling thought to the Pirates. The Pirates come to know about her magical power and they destroyed her village and kidnapped her. The pirates’ chief renamed her as Bhagyavati, the bringer of luck. She kills the pirates’ chief and becomes their Queen. She never feels at home, though she has all riches and servants at her command. So she contemplates death and sends a “calling thought” (21) to death. There comes a typhoon and the fear of death terminates her death wish and she now wants to live and expects help.

It is the sea serpents which render a helping hand to her and through them she learns about the island of spices, the Old One or the First Mother and the Spices.

Tilo after knowing about the island utters in joy: “The island of spice,’ I said, and it seemed that I had finally found a name for my wanting” (24). Tilo abandons the title offered by the sea serpents “Sarpa Kanya, snake maiden” (24). To taste more power she decides to go to the island where women like her can develop their supernatural talents, by using the spices only for good purposes. These women call themselves ‘Mistresses of Spices’ who are under the control and care of the First Mother, the eldest and wisest teacher of all women. Tilo and the other young girls are given new identities and new life in the island, which indicates that the past is being removed from their memories and they are made new personas. Tilo who fails to reveal her identity to the Old One amazes “Who was I? I could not say. Already my name had faded in the rising island sun, like a star from a night that has passed away” (33).

Divakaruni has created the island habituated only by females and devoid of men folks. She constructs the island as a maternal space of Tilo with the First Mother and the female novices. Tilo, who at present lives in California, is unable to shed behind the memories of the First Mother and the sister novices and hence the past dominates her present life. Tilo remembers the life in the island which was filled with both mystery and reality. She recollects “. . . our Mistress-lives to be full of the exotic, mystery and drama and danger. . . for the spice-power we were learning to bend to our purposes could have destroyed us in a moment if wrongly

invoked” (52). The Mistresses are trained for mind reading and also spend their time in basic common things such as sweeping, stitching and rolling wicks for lamps and so on.

Sedikides’ view about nostalgia, “. . . nostalgia can increase the feeling of social support by evoking nostalgic thoughts and recalling memories of those people” (15) seems to be appropriate here as recollection of Tilo’s past strengthens her present life. The period of her life in the island with the power of learning and empowerment, juxtaposes her life in her village where women are treated as inferior. In the island the First Mother nurtures the Mistresses, by educating and preparing them to face the next stage of their lives in their respective places, whereas Tilo’s birth place, a village considers women as a burden and treats them as “other”.

Harpreet Kaur Sahi Comments on Tilo’s life: “Her past is part of her current sphere, making it impossible for her to live simply “in the present” because the present does not exist by itself. The new sense of time is also expressed in the very structure of the text itself, for Divakaruni jumps from one temporal location to another with almost every chapter” (155). Stream of consciousness technique is used by Divakaruni to delineate most of her protagonists to show the characters’ flow of thoughts and feelings through the mind. The thoughts of the protagonists are not related or rather disconnected to each other, but they flow like a stream or river, which are random, disorderly and jump from one area to another. Divakaruni uses this technique in most of her novels to depict the hindrances she faces due to her Indian origin and cultural background among modern American values. The primary setting of *The Mistress of Spices* is the store but Divakaruni has presented other settings also. The settings change, as Tilo’s mind constantly wavers from past to present. Divakaruni has presented the flashbacks to Tilo’s village and the island. Tilo remains in her store Oakland but through her recollection Divakaruni often takes the readers to another location that is to the island of the Mistresses; she also highlights the past and present side by side. The readers can sense that Divakaruni has made use of simultaneous universe or different domains which co-exist at the same time and in the same place.

During the time of departure the Mistresses dance around Shampati fire face into it and arise out of it anew like Shampati bird. Divakaruni uses the metaphor Fire for the recreation of the self and presents identity as inconsistent rather than permanent. The Mistresses step in and disappear without sensing pain by destroying their physical form and reduce themselves to ashes which are to be scattered all over the world and from the ashes they take a new avatar like the phoenix bird. The First Mother warns them that the rebellious Mistresses who fail in their service will be recalled for further learning in the island but for some, it may be the end of their life and she also forewarns that their second journey through Shampati fire will be more painful. Sister-Mistresses without any agony in their faces walk into the fire and disappear but the warnings make the Mistresses aware of the perilous path they have chosen to tread upon.

In Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken* the speaker at first is in a dilemma to choose the road for travel but at last he decides to go by the less travelled road. Similarly Tilo and the Mistresses believe that when they look back their selected path after many years, they will see that they have actually chosen the less travelled road which makes them realize that their choice has made a great difference in their lives. People are free to choose yet they are unable to make the choice that will bring change in their life.

Tilo, who is the first in selecting her name, country for service, remains last to leave the island; when her Sister-Mistresses face the Shampati fire courageously Tilo hesitates; she utters "I was last in line . . ." (56). She has an ardent desire to remain in the island along with her First Mother. Tilo in her diasporic journey never feels at home anywhere but she considers the island her home. She emotionally pleads "Mother take back the power. Let me stay here with you. What satisfaction can be greater than to serve the one I love" (57-58). This incident shows the ambivalent nature of Tilo. It is quite ironical that Tilo who longed to attain power at any cost, is now ready to give up the powers she obtained to stay in her Homeland (Island) with her First Mother. Seeing her oscillation First Mother gives a slice of ginger root to keep her strong in her vows. Her uprooting from the Island was very difficult for Tilo. Tilo's hesitation to leave the island shows that she has strong attachment for her homeland. Ultimately Tilo leaves the island to Oakland with the hope of returning someday. Tilo's past is inescapable in her present life. The reality is that she neither goes back to the island nor continues her stay in Oakland. She is tossed between the fire and the frying pan.

Tilo for the first time feels the discomfort in her store. She experiences a pain of longing for a place to call home, “I run my hand over the door which looks so alien in outdoor light, and I am struck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness” (120). Tilo tolerates all her old physical pains and diverts her longings by helping the immigrants who come to her store. Tilo identifies the problems of her customers and connects them with her own past life. Tilo’s nostalgia though brings heavy loss to herself and her store; it finally ends in peace and happiness as she considers the island as her own homeland and the First Mother as her own mother. She cheerfully highlights her views about First Mother “. . . she who was truly first mother to me, who had given up all hope of being mothered” (42). Tilo’s re-rooting was also a difficult task.

Nostalgic memories on the other hand inspire positive feelings of joy, belonging and meaningfulness in life. As Nostalgia has both positive and negative sides, Tilo faces both. Negative effect of nostalgia is that she experiences loneliness, lack of social support, and loss of loved ones and positive nostalgia is that her past memories about the island offer her strength to face her life further. Sedikides comments: “It is also demonstrated that the nostalgia generates more positive effects rather than negative ones, and this attribute implies on nostalgia as being mainly a positive emotion” (12).

Nostalgia seems to be the major influencing factor for the diasporic community. The shift of places, incidents, feelings across the cultures happening instantaneously in the minds of the characters cause disturbances which might in certain cases lead to psychiatric diseases or suicidal tendencies. Divakaruni proposes balancing situations to set right the problems and it is the deciding factor that rests with the strengthening of their minds. Divakaruni herself a diasporic has experienced the positive way ahead in her life and she infuses this courage of conviction through her characters so that humanity in general would make this perspective an essential part of their life. As an artist this service to diasporic humanity in particular makes her a human being with compassion for society.

Most of the protagonists of Divakaruni taste nostalgia as per their appetite. The characters Tilo, and Lalita experience loneliness in their life and are afflicted with the pain of nostalgia which is notable, since the impact of their past life is heavy in their present. They are haunted and tortured by loneliness that has robbed their valuable peace, happiness and stability of mind. Tilo’s past memories about her island and First Mother make her isolated in an alien country. She has lot of choices and chances in her life to lead a normal familial life, though she commits mistakes by crossing the mistress’s rules due to

her love, her mind ever preoccupied with the thought of service to people, shows her deep attachment towards her homeland, the island. Restrictions always provoke a person to overrule the rules and regulations. But Tilo patiently accepts them which play havoc on her psyche.

As Aida Khorsandi opines, “. . . if nostalgia is being utilized in a healthy way, it will ease the process of adaptation and when the adaptation takes place, nostalgia is likely to fade away, but not entirely” (21). It is understood that nostalgia is a state of mind. The ecstatic memories of good times like the golden age of childhood or victorious moments are to be embraced and ruminated upon. The bad and torrid memories are to be left in oblivion and it should not be relived through memories.

Balancing the conflicts in uprooting and rerooting requires extraordinary mental strength and mental grooming in which Divakaruni's characters try their best to blow off the blues as their stay is their choice towards greener pastures. In the present world the inter-diasporic movement is accompanied by intra-diasporic movement. For example even in India, North Indians move towards the South for job opportunities and vice versa. So the mind set to reroot is increasingly felt and found in inter movement and intra movement. It is the mental abilities to adjust and align that make one's life meaningful and purposeful.

Life offers challenging situations but people with right perception convert obstacles into stepping stones. Divakaruni's ideology of sincere compromises and compassion for people around, whatever the colour may be would only make the life of immigrants a self-satisfying one. Divakaruni's single agenda in her writing career is to make humanity better and happy.

The paper concludes that the human society should grow fresh roots and to branch out in all possible directions whether they are in the East or West remembering and respecting their original roots. Diasporic literature thus helps to understand various cultural customs and breaks the barriers between different countries and tries to spread universal peace and establish brotherhood.

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