

Mingling of Cultures in “The Mistress of Spices”

by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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The landscape of contemporary literature has been transformed by the rising tide of globalization; texts are crossing the borders of nations and cultures as newly emerging authors express myriad voice of those once considered the subaltern. At the crest of this new literary wave is a new generation of South Asian female writers who have begun to make their unique mark upon the whole world of the novel.

In particular, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has distinguished herself among the ground-breaking as novelists in the genre of South Asian diasporic literature. Her accounts of the experience of the diaspora and its effects upon women not only provide the readers with insight into the lives of the 1.4 million South Asians who currently reside in the United States, but also presents a model with which we can better understand the cultures that have been facing because of the encounters between the East and the West.

This paper delineates the Mingling of Cultures in “The Mistress of Spices” written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an exponent in the realm of Diasporic Indian writing in English. She has carved her niche in the literary world as an immigrant writer. She employs her poetry and prose to form a bridge from Calcutta to California. In an interview appeared in India Currents, Divakaruni contents: "We Indian - Americans, are still in an early immigrant culture. We remember the old country and lament the loss of our roots, which adds poignancy to our writings". In fact Divakaruni in her works portray her native country culture and the manners of people

laborately she incorporates both the positive aspects as well as the negative aspects of India in

her works.

In the study, I have analysed the novel “The Mistress of Spices” Tilo (short for Tilotamma) in the novel is a genuine representative of the diasporic community. She experiences difficulties in the various roles assumed by her starting as a simple girl Bhagyavathi. Until her innate powers are revealed as Maya. Ironically, she is projected as a glorified person only when her powers are used for the benefits of her family. Her travesty with her identity takes an ugly turn when the pirates have abducted her and left her with a disturbing displacement as the Queen of Pirates. Her frantic search for identity continues even in the company of snakes. Finally she reaches the Island of Spices. Her glorious spell as the Mistress of spices lasts till her meeting with the "lonely American". A major character, Raven, too suffers from displacement albeit of a different kind. He is shocked to find his mother's ancestral link which connects him to the Red-Indian.

In today's scenario globalization has shown way to the mingling of cultures. The centrist, white centric dynamics of power is on the decline. The incongruity of West and East, which has so long segregated the whites from the numerous ethnic plebeians is fast losing its significance. This has resulted in the evolution of new concepts like 'hybridity' 'dialogism', 'integration', 'cultural diversity', and 'tolerance'. Mingling of cultures is an emerging phenomenon in the contemporary society. The term ‘spices’ and the charm associated with it immediately conjures up images of the orient. Spices play a significant role in the novel of symbolizes orientation. The novel propounds deep rooted mingling of cultures in its portrayal of cultural diversity of the migrant subject into the multi-ethnic American society.

Tilo administers a new role of spices to the expatriate Indians in Oakland. As the owner of the spice shop she encounters different people, working under certain restrictions. She has to depend solely on her customers to construct a view of the American social life. People of different ethnic and religious backgrounds flock to the store to fulfill their individual needs. Thus she meets Lalita, Jagjit, Daksha, Haroun, Kwesi, Raven, Geeta and the Bougainvillea girls. In the process of supplying groceries and other Indian commodities. She gleans out their problems, and tries to help them out by dispensing the appropriate spice. She helps only her folks by obeying the dictates of the Order of Mistress. In this novel Divakaruni adopts a complex strategy for unfolding the diasporic dilemma of the immigrants. It is through the eyes of Tilo that Divakaruni takes the readers to the private realms of her customers to encounter their joys and sorrows, struggles and hardships, hopes and frustrations. As the customers visit the shop again and again Tilo is able to read through their thoughts and communicate it to the readers who anxiously wait to see how the magical power of the spices helps to cure their problems.

Several subaltern voices peep out in the narrative which is legitimized by the author. Indians residing in Oakland exhibit their Indianess unconsciously in their dress, food habits, values and ideal. Tilo herself is an epitome for it. A string of plastic mango leaves is hung across the entrance of her spice store to ward off evil. The rich elitish type like Mrs. Kapadia would "think they're still in India". Lalita who prefers to be called A Huja's wife dare not to go against her husband's wishes to pursue her vocation. Daksha would not forget to buy ingredients for dalia pudding for her mother-in-law's 'ekadasi', a typical Indian religious rite for a widow. Geeta's grandfather, the ex-army man could never come to terms with his grand daughter's liberal ways. She abhors the fact that Geeta works in a professional setting with men, dines out with her

colleagues and comes home late. His patriarchal conditioned mind finds it shocking and prompts him to find a suitable match for her from India, Haroun, true to his cultural moorings, would religiously attend the namaaz in the masjid. Even the stylished Bougainvillea girls clothed in salwars would come to the store for buying spices for biryani, a typical Indian dish. In spite of staying abroad for years Geeta's parents Ramu and Shiela, cannot brush aside their prejudice against inter-racial marriage. They still believe in the Indian notion of arranged marriage as the only and best possible way of fixing the marriage of their only daughter. Though they do not believe in imposing restrictions on her, they insist that she understands and upholds their values. When Geeta intends to marry Juan, her mother was terribly shocked, upset and breaks down saying. "I never thought you'd do this to us, is this how you repay us for giving you so much freedom.."

Ahuja's male ego is hurt when he says, 'Am I not man enough man enough man enough'. He reflects the ideology of the Indian male for whom woman is the other, socially and intellectually inferior to take right decision about her life. The only place all these people rush to, seeking 'happiness' and remedy to alleviate their pains and sufferings is the spice bazaar. This store run by Tilo is in itself a microcosm of India. The store with its 'sacred, secret shelves functions as a geographical space that is the repository of a monolithic national identity. It is here where they feel mostly at home. They can get all their supplies ranging from grocery to embroidered sarees, from spices to sweetmeats and even mehandhi. The homely, nostalgic and magical atmosphere of the store make them confide in Tilo their problems and sufferings. Thus Tilo gets involved in their lives and tries to help them out, for she is the architect of the

immigrant dream' moreover she was Tilottama, "the essence of Til, life giver, restorer of health and hope". The magical healing power of the spices and Tilo's advice help them face life with new challenges and hopes. Jagjit joins Kwesi's karate classes. Lalita leaves home and an abusive husband to join a battered women's shelter. Geeta is reunited with her family who are no longer hostile to Juan, and Haroun finds happiness overcoming their problems and cultural barriers.

They are able to create a space for themselves, a common diasporic space. In this way

Divakaruni beautifully portrays the minority community's integration and mingling of cultures into the American culture.

In ancient times spices lured the West to the East. The whole colonial project started on account of the spices. Divakaruni's magical treatment of the spices makes them all the more alluring. They are invested with a magical power to heal, cure, and to restore happiness and well-being. Clearly the spices and their mistress symbolically represent an ancient culture characterized by its complexity and exoticism. The author's emphasis on the curative powers of Indian ayurveda medicine symbolized through the spices can be perceived as an attempt to unfold the richness of a culture, marginalized and suppressed by the colonial hegemony as also by the WASP culture. Tilo herself is a metaphor for the young Asian woman caught between tradition and modernity, duty and love. The universality of the spices assign them a certain cosmopolitan character, they act not only as taste enhancers but also cure the maladies of mingling of cultures. They help to dissolve boundaries and promote love and understanding among people as Tilo says that we all have the same needs and desires, and on the basis of it a

new space is created where different cultures meet.

Raven begins to distance himself from his mother and the values, she espouses. He turns away from the materialistic world symbolizes by the American culture to the spiritual world represented by his rich aboriginal culture. Thus Divakaruni forcefully foregrounds the marginalized voice which had remained so long unheard. Moreover Raven's final identification with the mythological bird eventually helps him to find his spiritual counterpart in Tilo. Again Tilo, who had so long adhered to the strict rules of the order of Mistress finds herself in a terrible mental turmoil, being unable to choose between duty and desire. Her conflict is between the real youthful self, and the outer, aged, powerful self. She ultimately renounces her magical powers to become an ordinary woman who finds her new space in her union with Raven. Like Geeta who is all East and West mixed up, Tilo emerges as a cosmopolitan character. Breaking free from the fetters of tradition she re-discovers her true self in 'Maya'. On the one hand the communion between Geeta and Juan, and Tilo and Raven reflects the inevitable cultural intersections of globalization on the other it establishes the subaltern voices as legitimate. The earthquake at the end of the narrative symbolizes the destruction of the established order and a crumbling of the geo- political - cultural world where the hegemony of the West prevails.

It is therefore, the dominant global consciousness that drag all cultures and belief- systems towards the political ultra elite which is fully emerged in the global mass culture of politics. This would slowly but inevitably tend to subvert, weaken, and ultimately decimate all cultures which do not cater to the terms and conditions laid down by the mass global culture and economy. It is here that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has successfully tried to underscore the mingling of cultures nuances of the so called unheard cultures and societies of which the ideal

symbol is the shamanistic, Mistress of Spices. For Divakaruni, understanding the important aspects of all cultures is the only panacea for the society. She wants to have a society which is free from hate, crime and paranoid behaviour.

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