

A DIALOGUE WITH SPICES: AN ECO-CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY IN DIVAKARUNI'S "MISTRESS OF SPICES"

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Abstract

Humans have migrated transversely beyond social, ethnic, and physical confines over generations, searching for better prospects and novel avenues. The migrants carry with them cultural and indigenous baggage that, at times, act as a guiding factor in the new space and, on other occasions, throws them into challenging and conflicting circumstances. Various authors have delved into this ocean of diaspora and unveiled the hidden literary treasures which highlight disparate grounds of an immigrant's connection to his motherland. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such author who has constantly strived to bring out her characters' diasporic sensibility using diverse attributes such as nature, culture, and mythology. In her renowned literary piece, "Mistress of Spices" (1997), Divakaruni has plotted out the connection of the émigré protagonist Tilottama (Tilo), who uses her magical powers to converse with spices, which form the biotic component of the earth, to solve the mundane issues of other immigrants. Tilo acts as a connecting link between diasporas and homeland through the medium of nature and environment, which is the underlining attribute of all the living and non-living survivals in this sphere. It structures the framework for the growth and development of social civilization. Flora and fauna constitute human existence's essentials, thereby affecting their lives in wide-ranging ways across boundaries. The paper aims to bring out the link between the environment and humans and how it further supports the survival of migrants in the new land using an earth-centred approach of analysis. The paper attempts to analyse the novel "Mistress of Spices" from an eco-critical perspective, employing environmental psychologist Tim Kasser's theories and the concepts of eco-critics, namely Emerson and Thoreau.

Keywords: Diaspora, Diasporic Sensibility, Eco-Centric Approach, Green Studies, Eco-Criticism.

Communities moved from one place to another in search of a hospitable natural habitat in primaevial times; and in search of better opportunities and refuge later in settled, agricultural societies. Today, the diasporic Indian community is one of the largest migrant groups in the world and is among the most seamlessly assimilated communities in the host cultures. It is a prosperous and influential community, achieving this by adopting a largely non-confrontational attitude vis-à-vis the new cultural milieu. However, this does not mean that the pull of the mother culture dissipates or that diasporic Indians abandon it willingly. The desire to hold on to and take pride in the mother country and culture remains strong. The Indian Migratory movements have been affected over the ages for different reasons. A majority of migrants in the Indian colonial states were from the financially weaker sections of the society and so were pushed into migration by factors such as economic and political upheaval, socio-cultural hierarchies, natural calamities, and exploitation by landlords. This helplessness got attracted by the pull factors like growing economic opportunities, expanding surrounding areas, and the export of mineral and agricultural produce. Humans have migrated transversely beyond social, ethnic, and physical confines over generations, searching for better prospects and novel avenues. The migrants carry along with them their cultural and indigenous baggage that, at times, act as a guiding factor in the new space and, on other occasions, throws them into challenging and conflicting circumstances. Various authors like Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ramabai Espinet, and many more have delved into this ocean of diaspora and unveiled the hidden literary treasures which highlight disparate grounds of an immigrant's connection to his motherland. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such author who has constantly strived to bring out her characters' diasporic sensibility using diverse attributes such as nature, culture, and mythology. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the eminent South Asian Diasporic author, has authored novels and short stories around the subjects of transnationalism, immigration, cross-culturalism, and search for identity belongingness, and multiculturalism. She deracinates her characters from their native lands and plants them in a new world, braiding stories around the difficulties and tribulations they face in the new environment. In most of her works, her female characters are the protagonists, who initially become victims of the new socio-cultural

and socio-environmental pressure but later emerge as independent and resilient characters proving themselves to be strong, courageous, and brave. Her stories, intertwined with the modern-day problems, give a realistic presentation of immigrant women who are displaced and relocated and are often seen reflecting on and remembering their happy and joyful past. Her characters compare their present uncomfortable situation with their blissful past, either using it as a coping mechanism to survive adversities and even derive inspiration or turn the pages of history for sheer enjoyment. The personified remoteness from their motherland and their encounters with the novel ways of life bestowed upon them a “double vision” enabling them to observe both candidly and nostalgically at their parent culture and the foreign ethos where they seek amalgamation (Divya,59). Divakaruni’s narrative style in novels like *Mistress of Spices*, *Sisters of My Heart*, *Oleander Girl*, and short-story collections like *Arranged Marriage*, is evidence of her multi-faceted splendour. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni projects a lot about immigrants’ problems. Migration and its impact on individuals have been one of the focal aspects of Divakaruni’s works which have been brought forth skilfully along with other themes such as transnationalism, multiculturalism, cross-cultural behaviours, nostalgia, and the struggle for identity that are vividly brought out in her works. Her exploration of South-Asian immigrant women has given her an established recognition of an eminent diasporic writer, adhering to which she has concocted plots and narrations illuminating the complexities and convolutions of migration and migrants. The Rain Flies is a poem where Chitra brings forth the scene of a rainy day where she presents the predicament of an immigrant through the symbol of the rain flies who are too innocent and seem to be attracted to the bright light unknown of the danger.

The moving after the storm
The maid would sweep out
Piles of pale wings, torn and shimmer less
The blind bodies crawling
Ant like in desperate circles
Searching for the flame (Divakaruni)

Nature is another important element that Divakaruni has exhaustively used in her narrative to bring out the connection of her characters to their origins and roots. Flora and fauna constitute human existence’s essentials, thereby affecting their lives in wide-ranging ways across boundaries. A resemblance to this can also be observed in the lines of Byron wherein he reinstates the connection between human and nature-
live in myself, but I become
Portion of that around me, and to me
High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
Of human cities torture: I can see
Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
A link reluctant in a fleshly change . . . (Byron, LXXII).

In her renowned literary piece, “Mistress of Spices” (1997), Divakaruni has plotted out the connection of the émigré protagonist Tilotama (Tilo), who uses her magical powers to converse with spices, which form the biotic component of the earth, to solve the mundane issues of other immigrants. Tilo acts as a connecting link between diasporas and homeland through the medium of nature and environment, which is the underlining attribute of all the living and non-living survivals in this sphere. It structures the framework for the growth and development of social civilization. The paper analyses the selected diasporic text “Mistress of Spices” from the ecocritical perspective that better reflects the current expansion, progress, societal and dogmatic influences on the founding of individuality. It helps one look back into India’s traditional and cultural myths and the undermining impacts of transformation and globalization. Corresponding to Nayar: Eco-criticism stems from a bio-social environment of unrestricted capitalism, unwarranted misuse, abuse and mistreatment of nature, unnerving meanings and types of progress, and ecological vulnerability.

“To be speaking about nature in a literary text means to be dealing with just such a social or cultural construction, and with its often conflicting and heterogeneous history. The shift from ‘nature’ to ‘Nature’, from ambiguous and infinite matter to conceptual generalisation and abstraction is made possible by a socio-cultural organisation of nature in human terms . . . Organized Nature then becomes the guiding norm for proper human behaviour, divided into natural and unnatural. The natural serves as an important concept in much ethical and political debate and thus nature finds itself a major actor at the heart of human concerns” (Roxana, 66).

In the novel “The Mistress of Spices”, Divakaruni blends magic and realism via Tilo, who manages a spices-cum-grocery shop. Tilo supports others with the magical enchantments of spices, but as soon as she starts loving Raven, she has to elect for herself what legacy she wishes to ascertain. The past captures a craze, and the present would show a path to the future, and Tilo is entirely stuck in this labyrinth. According to E.M. Foster characters are of two types- one is ‘flat character’ that is straightforward and constructed around ‘a single idea or quality’ (Foster, 1981); thus, that is simple to designate. An additional one

is 'round character' and also called 'two dimensional' (Abrahms, p.48) characters that are multifaceted and complex with distinct features and undergo a transformation that is difficult to explain. In the novel "The Mistress of Spices", Tilo the central character of the Mistress of Spices is a 'round character'. She has several qualities and her personality develops gradually as the story goes along. She grows with the plot and transforms herself at every juncture to modify and enhance her character. Tilottama is the proprietor of 'Spice Bazaar' in Oakland, California. She harnesses the magical powers of the Indian Spices in her store, helps her customers regulate their lives, and helps them solve their day-to-day immigrant issues. The seasonings are handled as characters in the narrative by Divakaruni. The spices act as 'flat characters' because they remain unaffected, unaltered, and steady throughout the novel. The spices bend to her authority, show their magical powers and strength. A variety of Indian spices are found in Tilo's SPICE BAZAAR, and when arranged in her palm, the spices communicate to her and guide the mistress at vital hours. Tilottama, the mistress of spices says:

"I know their origins, and what their colors signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true name it was given at the first when earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood. From amchur to zafran, they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers."

Divakaruni comments about her book: "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 in my attempt to create a modern fable." The novel is centred on an Indian girl Tilottama, who has moved to Oakland and runs her spice store "Spice Bazar". Tilo harnesses the power of spices to help people overcome difficulties, and she senses the needs and problems of her customers and helps them accordingly. The novel is opulent with respect to Indian myths, and Divakaruni has beautifully amalgamated mythology with a modern sensibility and woven a beautiful story around her characters.

Born as Nayan Tara, which means star-steer, Tilo began to foretell about the happenings. She became quite popular in surrounding villages and was kidnapped by pirates who burnt and destroyed her native place. She was named "Bhagyavati, sorceress, pirate queen, the bringer of luck and death". She was not happy being the pirate queen, and so after she received insights from the serpents, she decided to move to a magical island. In the novel, snakes and speaking serpents play a significant role as myths. In Indian mythology, snakes and speaking serpents are "associated with fertility and are chronic manifestations of the Mother Goddess". The snakes, which are mythically a symbol of rebirth and regeneration, give a new life to the protagonist. Tilottama is welcomed by the old one – the "First mother"- of the island who takes care of all the spice girls till they mature and become reliable enough to guide the lives of common people. Tilo lands and spends her time among the tranquil yet mystical island to absorb and acquire from the old one. Tilo learns the art of harnessing the powers of spices on the magical island. After completion of her education, she is transported to America through "Shampati's fire". Shampati fire is a reference to the Shampati bird, which is equivalent to the phoenix of Greek mythology. There's a mention of the Shampati bird in Hindu mythology in Ramayana. Sampati was Jatayu's elder brother who sacrificed his wing in his childhood to save his brother; later, he helped Lord Ram's companions with directions when they came in search of Sita. Shampati fire in the novel acts as a guide to all the mistresses by sending them to places where they can begin their lives as Mistress of Spices.

The Sampati bird is also an allusion to the phoenix. The bird arises from its ashes just as the phoenix. The fire represents the end to the previous and the birth of new. The *Shampati fire* depicts the new origin for the mistresses after going through the fire. Tilo landed in Oakland after going through the changes caused by the sacred fire. Sampati provides a new identity to Tilo. Nayan tara and Bhagyavati did not know the purpose of their lives, but the manner in which Sampati was crucial to Sita's freedom, the shampati fire is crucial to Tilo's new identity.

The novelist has restated Indian myths concerning spices to symbolize history. Red Chilli is mythically supposed to be the offspring of 'Fire God', Turmeric is believed to have come out of the ocean when the Asuras and Devas churned it for the valuable resources and treasures of the cosmos. It is purported that Fenugreek was planted by Shabari, the oldest woman and Fennel was eaten by wise Vashistha after swallowing the demon Illwal so that he would not come back to life again. As the novel progresses, it appears to the readers that there is a spice for all circumstances, all vibes, and all troubles. The accurate one can cause you, love, resolve household woes, or even get you a job which sets up the foundational premise of "The Mistress of Spices". Each section of the novel has been identified after a spice unveiling its mysterious strengths, powers, and roots.

The narrator weaves the overwhelming narrative of seasonings with a blend of environment, where nature grow into an essential part of the narrative and a character. Divakaruni utilizes components of nature to go beyond the world of nature. "Sea mist, the island cast its pearl light around us." As she describes the island, she says, "The sky is black and smoky. There is no sky, and no sea either." The author incorporates multiple literary devices such as adjectives, similes, and symbols from the environment and nature to highlight the intensity and intricacies of her narratives and sketches. She defines the accompanying spice women as "they become water wraiths, spirits of mist and salt, crying in the voice of the gulls".(34) As the mistresses are departing, she states, "We had known it would be hard to leave this island of women where on our skin the warm rain fell like

pomegranate seeds, where we woke to birdcall and slept to the First Mother's singing, where we swam naked without shame in lakes of blue lotus". (54)

Divakaruni has excelled in bringing out parallels between nature and women. The struggle between women and patriarchy runs in parallel with the fight between nature and the homo-centric mindset of society. In the novel, the spices sacrifice themselves to fulfil the adjurations of earthly born individuals, and likewise, the women sacrifice at every stage for the family and others. The male-controlled civilization browbeats women and nature for their requirements and profit. Tilo was a usual ordinary village girl. But as she grew old, her prophetic power for foretelling catastrophes and discovering misplaced objects intensified her reputation. As fame widened, the buccaneers of the sea took her away from her motherland. She was compelled to leave all her joy, happiness, and treasured ones for their profit and accomplishment. Correspondingly, spices were taken across seas to get wealth, and they were utilized by anthropocentric societies for their benefit. Spices, herbaceous plants, and all the components of nature are for the advantage of the people, just as the potentials of women are also used for the fulfilment of needs and demands of others. Tilo uses these spices- the novel's minor characters, to solve the issues and problems of other immigrant characters.

Divakaruni has effectively incorporated nature and its elements at several stages in her novel. She has used water, earth, and fire, the vital components of the environment, and has adroitly interlaced them into her narrative. The water through which Bhagawati sent her callings, the fire of Sampati, which showed a new path to our protagonist, and finally, the earthquake marked a new beginning for Tilo and her love life. These natural elements establish the Indian philosophy of creation, preservation and destruction, and re-birth. Collectively Tilottama and Raven seek out the "earthly paradise", a fantasy realm signifying a quixotic existence. "High up in the mountains, pine and eucalyptus, damp odour of redwood, bark and cone" (199). Nevertheless, the duo comprehends that a novel world can be fashioned from the carcasses and remains of the demolished world: "Because there is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make back there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug-dust, the young men, and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and waking in cells. Yes, in the hate in the fear" (315). This led to a completion of the entire natural cycle which began with Nayantara's birth as a foreseer and later is conserved and restored as Tilo goes on to become the spice girl under the able guidance of the First mother. At the culmination, all of Tilo's powers are retracted; she violates the rules of being ardently attached with another human and defies rules when she takes the shape of an attractive woman. The tremor demolishes all but could not shake her belief to regenerate again from wreckages and rubble. Tilottama establishes that life sprigs again in obliteration as well.

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