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-centered approach of analysis. The paper attempts to analyze 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 primeval 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. This does not mean, however, 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 governed by different reasons over the ages. A majority of migrants in the Indian colonial states were poor and so 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, expansion of 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 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 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 that orbit around the subjects of transnationalism, immigration, cross-culturalism, search for identity, belongingness, and multiculturalism. She deracines 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 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 splendor. 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 skillfully along with the other themes of transnationalism, multiculturalism, cross-cultural behaviors, nostalgia, and struggle for identity. 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. An intimate connection between human and nature around can be observed in these lines of Byron wherein he states-

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 Tillo Tillo, 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. Tillo 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 which stipulates a better reflection of current progress, expansion, societal and dogmatic influences on the founding of individuality with a look back down into India’s traditional and cultural myths along with the undermining impacts of transformation and globalization. Corresponding to Nayyar: 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 had 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 transformation therefore difficult to explain. In the novel “The
Mistress of Spices” written by renowned writer Divakaruni, Tilo the central character of the Mistress of Spices is ‘round character’. She has several qualities and develops herself in the story. 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 and she harnesses the magical powers of the Indian Spices in her store and helps her customers in regulating their lives and solve their day-to-day immigrant issues. The seasonings are handled as characters in the narrative by Divakaruni. The spices act as ‘flat characters’ for the reason that they remain unaffected, unaltered, and steady throughout the novel. The spices bend to her authority, show their possessions and magical 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 centered on an Indian girl Tilottama, who has moved to Oakland and runs her spice store “Spice Bazaar”. Tilo harnesses the power of spices to help people overcome difficulties. She senses the needs and problems of her customers and helps them accordingly. The novel is opulent in respect of Indian myth. Divakaruni in “Mistress of Spices” has beautifully amalgamated the mythology with a modern sensibility and woven a 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 as “Bhagyavati, sorceress, pirate queen, the bringer of luck and death”. She was not happy being the pirate queen and so on being informed by serpents she moved 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. The First mother lives on the island where 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 showed the direction to Ram’s companions who were 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 phoenix. Sampati 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 way Sampati was crucial to Sita’s freedom, similarly, 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 Asuraas 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 Anjaneyam. The spices act as characters in the 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 intensity and intricacies to her narratives and sketches. She defines the accompanying spice women as “they become water wreaths, 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 have to be left to us 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 fulfill the adulations of earthly born individuals and likewise, the women sacrifice at every stage for the family and others. Women and nature are browbeaten by the male-controlled...
civilization 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 intensify 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 society for their benefits. 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 fulfillment of needs and demands of others. Tilo uses these spices which are the minor characters of the novel 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 environment, and has interlaced them into her narrative adroitly. The water through which Bhagawati sent her callings, the fire of Sampati which showed a new path to our protagonist, and finally the earthquake which 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 comprehend 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 as she violates the rules of being ardently attached with another human and also defies rules when she takes shape of an attractive woman. The tremor demolishes all but could not shake her belief to regenerate again from wreckage and rubble. Tilottama establishes that life sprigs again in obliteration as well.

REFERENCES