

The Oriental Journey -A Trajectory in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to explore the prospects of transitioning from alienation to acculturation. The ability to change the bitterness of alienation into the sweetness of acculturation lies in the hands of the immigrant. *The Mistress of spices* through the characters in the novel divulges the secret of acculturation along with its hitches and the requisite for acculturation. Having made it to the host land, it is good for the immigrant to stop brooding over situations and work on settling down. At times, the immigrant might have to resort to the road less travelled, as suggested by Robert Frost in his poem, *The Road Not Taken*, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference". The diasporic phase should no longer be a battle of the minds but rather a platform for a growth mindset. As the shifting of tectonic plates creates new territories and new horizons, it is high time that a shift in the diasporic mindset is observed. One of the unique features of a growth mindset is to use the roadblocks of migration as opportunities for learning. Migration is a good time to understand and experience the wholesome culture of the place, to dissect the experiences of myth and misconception and fact from fiction, firsthand, in tandem with the sharing of cultural best practices and customs of the homeland.

Keywords: victim, diaspora, alienation, assimilation, acculturation

1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a South Asian diasporic writer. Her works reveal a sense of pride in possessing rich culture and tradition handed down by her ancestors. Her resolve to dissolve if not narrow the boundaries of marginalization, exploitation, and patriarchal dominance of women calls for appreciation. It also reflects the upheaval task of women in carving a niche for themselves and the joy of accomplishing the same. Her works reveal her fondness to liberate the mindset of women. This is visible in her interaction with organisations: Maitri, Daya, and Pratham who work towards addressing issues of marginalized women. Speaking of the organizational impact on the lives of women in despair, Divakaruni recounts, that she "strives to create a world of its own in which binaries would be females themselves who in one way or the other complement each other and thereby help the other on emotional levels to survive loses, " (Thampy (2019), 218).

2. Problem Statement

1) In this diasporic world. Can a woman survive alone. and should a woman have to put up with the abuse ever in her life.

2) The classical Assimilation model is used further to discuss the problem.

A good introduction answers these questions in just a few pages and, by summarizing the relevant arguments and the past evidence, gives the reader a firm sense of What was done and why (Beck & Sales, 2001).

3. Discussion

Her pictures of women are authentic as she lives the experience shared. K.S. Dhanam (2018), reminisces that Chitra Banerjee, "has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos" (Kulkarni 62). Through *The Mistress of Spices*,

Divakaruni's innovative streak is palpable. The title etaphorically indicates Tilo's control over her desires and her desire to control others.

I am a Mistress of Spices. [...]

I know their origins, and what their colours 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 moves in my blood. From *amchur* to *zafran*, they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield to me their hidden properties, their magic powers (Divakaruni 3).

Drawing parallels, 'Spice' and 'Indian' culture bear semblance to each other. Each chapter in this novel is identified with a spice, bequeathing the reader with its magical power and guidelines with correct usage to experience its uniqueness. Through a passage by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* the title of Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* can be understood how the different ingredients essential for food can be transformed into delectable recipes.

There is also the matter of the spice bases. The intricacies of turmeric and cumin, the subtlety of fenugreek, when to use large (and when small) cardamoms; the myriad possible effects of garlic, garam masala, stick cinnamon, coriander, ginger ... not to mention the flavourable contributions of the occasional speck of dirt. (Saleem is no longer obsessed with purity.) [...] The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind [...] (Rushdie 442 -44)

Diasporic Journeys signify, "a collective trauma, banishment" (Cohen 9). The fact is that every human on planet earth is a sojourner and hence a diasporic. However, the minute we are born, we have learned to adapt. We have the skill set to adjust and adapt. We come into the world alone and will leave the world alone. We have to come to accept this fact of life except for the conscious acceptance of creating, a 'home' away from home. The question now is, which side of the sandwich do I relish, assimilation or acculturation? Ben(2018) defines, Assimilation as,

a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups; and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.

And Acculturation as, "The process of acquiring a 'second culture', usually as an effect of sustained and imbalanced contact between two societies". To answer this question, an in-depth analysis and reflection of the journey of migration is a prerequisite to navigating from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. A comparative analysis of alienation, assimilation, and acculturation reveals that the response to these determinants is quintessential to a successful migration. Today's globalization can provide the tools for acculturation. However, the decision is in the mindset of the migrant. It is therefore, the individual's desire and decision to cleave to the web of alienation or climb out of it and create one's own independent identity. Elizabeth Softsky's (1997) comments on Tilo, in *The Mistress of Spices*, "Tilo is the quintessential immigrant - she must decide which parts of her heritage she will keep and which parts she will leave behind" applies to all immigrants.

The multifarious reasons for the diasporic movement are painfully yet intricately put forward by Divakaruni's protagonists. This can be further understood through a topological thinking bounded, on the protagonists' character of existence and experience: "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing" (Martin Heidegger (2003) 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' 41). Hence it showcases the existence is always in place that enable a immigrant to deal with diasporic dilemmas and move out of them. The immigrant faces humongous diasporic dilemmas, one among them is alienation. Alienation could be due to the lack of familial support, racism, roadblocks, and generational differences. The past of Lalitha as reflected by Beena Agarwal (2011):

Her nostalgia and isolation becomes more intense. She unconsciously associates her personal tragedy with the shift of location ... With the recollection of the memories of joyous days, she feels herself guilty for the motives that had inspired her to migrate to America" (57)

Faced with alienation, the characters in *The Mistress of Spices* are at the crossroads of their journey in the host land. They can either choose the strategies to acculturate or resort to return migration. John S. Muthyala (2001) muses, "Assimilation into the host culture does not fully restore a sense of equilibrium that balances or rather harmonises the experience of alienation and loss engendered in the experience of travel and relocation, and neither is sustaining a pure unadulterated native culture and identity in foreign location a fully realizable possibility" (Muthyala 53). Drowning in self-alienation is Lalitha. Enamoured by the west, she is married to Ahuja, a bald, dock worker at a very young age, despite the age difference. Prior to her marriage, she is emotionally, psychologically, and economically independent. Her marriage marks the turning point in her life. This is explicitly revealed in her newly identified name, Mrs Ahuja. This shift exposes the social evils of patriarchal domination, marginalisation, and exploitation she has to face even in America. Veena Selvam says, "This indicates that the world as we know it, though inhabited by both halves of humanity, is actually a male world" (Selvam 56). Geographical boundaries have shifted, and lifestyle has changed yet life for Mrs. Ahuja has not changed, except the loss of her identity.

Lalitha has been portrayed by Divakaruni as a woman in a cage who likes to soar high in the sky. Her tailoring skills can turn bales of cloth into exquisitely designed outfits. Her work can improve the economic condition of the family. However, she is strictly prohibited from working. For Ahuja, a woman's place is at home and in the kitchen. Lalitha's desperation can be sensed in her talk with Tilo. Narrating her experience of loneliness and state of alienation. Lalitha laments, "All day at home is so lonely, the silence like quicksand sucking at her wrists and ankles" (Divakaruni 1998: 60). Her longing for a child is also not fulfilled as her husband blames her that she is barren. Moreover, this infuriates Ahuja, he not only refuses to go in for a checkup but forgets that Lalitha is his wife and batters the life out of her. This emboldens her as she thinks, "If my parents do not love me enough to understand, I thought, then so be it" (Divakaruni 287).

Day and nights pass by with conflicting thoughts of self-liberation. Lalitha uses the confined of a fixed mindset as a stepping stone and shifts towards a growth mindset, despite the conflicting thoughts that plague her as she imagines the reactions to her decision by her parents, siblings, husband, and relatives. She exploits the positives of both cultures. Encouraged by Tilo's words, "I deserve, dignity. I deserve happiness" (Divakaruni 272). She decides to become economically independent using her tailoring skills yet retains her love for her culture as she asks Tilo, "Mataji, pray for me that I will remain strong enough" (Divakaruni 289), rendering her journey across the seas, purposeful and meaningful.

Equally praiseworthy is Tilo, the spice maker capable of magic concoctions is not spared the net of alienation. Adopting a life of solitude, she decides to be the epitome of her culture. Her primary role is to help her customers with secret potions of spices. She religiously follows the Old one's instructions, "You are not important. No Mistress is. What is important is the store. And the spices" (Divakaruni 5).

The frequency of dealing with her customers and listening to their constant bickering and difficult lives, Tilo shares the secret of each spice and its working with her customers. The Bougainvillea girls' visit to the store entices her to assimilate and enjoy the freedom of America that they enjoy. Despite their love to prepare authentic Indian dishes for parties, the second-generation bougainvillea girls have seamlessly assimilated into the American culture. Their outfits are proof of this, "... hair polished as ebony, coiled in agile braids. Or rippling like mountain water around upturned faces so confident you know nothing had ever happened to them" (Divakaruni 48).

The Desire for acculturation is further accentuated by Raven's visit to the store. In the pursuit of liberation, she falls into the love trap of Raven. She is caught in the conflagration of duty and love. This conflict is well described by Lara Merlin.

In an exuberant first novel, the award-winning writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and the community. Addressing the immigrant experiences in particular, she asks how to negotiate between the needs of each under the earth -moving stress of desire (Merlin 207).

The lust for love and life forces her to slowly forget the warnings that she receives from the Old One. Stepping out of her shell, she is caught in the whirlwind of diasporic dilemmas. The words flung unconsciously at her, "Did you see that dress?' 'It's pathetic, isn't it', says the other one, 'what some women will do to look young'" (Divakaruni 235), slice her heart.

The pull of love is overwhelming and she accepts Raven's invitation to a night of love. She considers it her duty to satisfy the needs of her customers and can retrieve her identity as Tilo, the spice maker by penance. With this new realization, she lets herself drown in his love as voiced by the spice Makaradwaj,

Let him be discoverer of the land that you are, mountain and lake and cityscape. Let him carve out roads where none went before Let him enter finally where you are deepest and most unknown, thick vines, jaguar cry, the dizzying odor of rajanigandha, the wild tuberose, flower of the bridal night. For isn't love the illusion that you will open yourselves totally to each other, suffering no distance to be kept. (Divakaruni 307)

Accomplishing the night of fulfillment, she now experiences the dilemma of assimilation and acculturation. She is now unwilling to let go of her cultural duty as spice maker. She muses that Raven probably loved her for the colour of her skin, trying to digest his mother's true identity, Indian American, fantasy or because of the magic that she possessed. After a brief struggle, her call to acculturate is more decisive. This is exquisitely tangible as she discards her previous role and name as Tilo, the spice maker and takes on a new name, Maya, with a blend of both cultures, "Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day" (Divakaruni 338).

Geeta's grandfather moves to America as a tourist to stay with his son as he is alone in India. Situations are in perfect harmony until the day he decides to share his opinion regarding his granddaughter's upbringing and her marriage prospects. His strong belief in upholding tradition and culture results in strained relationships, especially with his granddaughter. He is alienated and finds himself in a more desperate condition than he was in India. He speculates the cause of alienation to be his lack of understanding and accepting the new perspective of the new generation in the west. "They long for a perfect life, but perfect life eludes them. There is no perfect life, according to Divakaruni. We all need to settle our differences, making the best of what we have. That to Divakaruni is what life is all about" (Noor 108). Deciding to restore the peace and joy in the family, he works very hard in convincing his son and daughter-in-law to accept Geeta's boyfriend, a Chicano as their son -in law. Geeta's return to the family and the family's acceptance of Juan is a sign of cultural assimilation.

The bougainvillea girls in the novel symbolize both, 'tradition' and 'modernity'. They are economically independent yet love to prepare authentic Indian dishes. The latter is validated by their visit to Tilo's store. Hameeda, a divorcee takes up lessons in English in order to adapt to her new way of life in America. Lalitha, Tilo, Geeta, and the minor characters in the novel, the bougainvillea girls and Hameeda's journey in life is well deciphered by Elaine Showalter's reference to the different phases in a woman's life. Their transformation signifies a change in mindset portraying them as successful individuals and role models for the diaspora. She claims,

First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant traditions and the *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward free from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity (Showalter 13).

4. Conclusion

Divakaruni declares, "I think it's very exciting to see how people change, how entire communities will take on new identities because of where they've lived or because of their history. That's what's happening in India and among Indians abroad" (Bolick 3). Extremism exists in a few characters trying to assimilate. Jagjit, the ten-and-a-half-year-old Punjabi experiences alienation in school due to his skin colour. Determined to prove himself, he makes friends with the senior boys at school by running errands for them. This transformation of his alienated self is discreetly highlighted in his attire, T-shirt, baggy Girbaud jeans, and untied laces. Manu like Jagjit realises that dwelling in nostalgia is the harbinger of success. This negatively impacts his lifestyle. He resorts to drinking binges and partying with girls. His change in lifestyle is his way of assimilation.

As discussed, the possibility of acculturation is a reality as validated by Divakaruni in her essay, *Art of Dissolving Boundaries*, "We need to remain secure in our own identity but participate fully in the culture, politics and daily life of America. The important part of integration is that you don't give up, you share" (Divakaruni 5).

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