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Agony and Alienation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

[1]Mrs. Karthikeyeni N, **[2]Dr. Latharani S**,

[1]Ph.D Scholar, Govt. Hr.Sec.School, Vellaiyamapatti, Madurai.

[2]Research Supervisor, Department of English, NMSSVN College, Madurai.

Abstract: Diaspora is one of the most significant topics of discussion in the arena of world literature. It deals with a variety of themes; some of the most prominent themes are alienation, rootlessness, displacement, and discrimination. Immigrants move from one place to another in search of a better lifestyle, job opportunities, economic and educational aspirations, and the pursuit of freedom. They experience numerous challenges when they undergo the journey of transformation to fulfil their dreams. Beyond success in their venture, they experience psychological trauma, discrimination and alienation which impact their mental health. Some of the common psychological struggles of immigrants are cultural shock and identity crisis, social and cultural isolation and loneliness, discrimination and prejudice, generational and intergenerational, and traditional and cultural conflicts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays immigrants' experiences in an empathetic way and never fails to capture their struggles. Through her novel, *The Mistress of Spices (1997)*, Divakaruni reveals her profound understanding of immigrants' traumatic experiences and addresses their predicaments, as well as their resilience and strength. This paper explores the psychological challenges of immigrants and reveals their emotional trauma while navigating their lives with two distinct cultures in new cultural landscapes.

Keywords: Alienation, Rootlessness, Discrimination, Immigrants, Trauma, Migration.

The word 'Diaspora', derived from the Greek word 'Diasperio', literally means the dispersion of people from one place to another, especially from their homeland to the unknown world. In the modern era, individuals migrate to different parts of the world in search of better life, job opportunities, on account of economic compulsions, social, political, and environmental factors. Diaspora literature often depicts the idea of homeland which explores the human connection with their homelands. It highlights an inquisitive attachment to its cultural tradition, region, landscape, food, and languages, giving birth to diasporic literature that primarily deals with individuals' psychological connection to their homeland. Every year a large number of human migrations take place throughout the world, millions of people have migrated to various parts of the world under the force of political instability, war, and violence, ethnic and religious reasons, and for better quality of life or self-imposed exiles.

Migration from India to other nations has given rise to Indian voices in the field of diasporic writing. These immigrant writers have made significant contributions to world literature by addressing their unique perspectives shaped by their immigrant experiences in foreign lands. Their writings reflect their feeling of alienation and rootlessness and largely give voice to the traumatic experiences of immigrants by capturing the clash of two cultures. In her essay, Rathi comments, "Diaspora is an important topic to be related with the alienated, rootless, dislocated immigrants from their native homeland, a shifting population from one locale to another. The expatriate Indian English Literature is deeply rooted in the geographical culture and cultural ethos" (Rathi 155).Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the significant writers in the field of Indian Diasporic literature and occupies a distinctive place in the diaspora. She has migrated from India and settled in America. However, she follows the cultural tradition of her roots and wants her children to adopt Indian values. Her works skilfully deal with themes like displacement, alienation, racial discrimination, and identity crisis, the psychological trauma of immigrants, assimilation and multiculturalism.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American writer whose narrative explicitly captures immigrants' lives in the alien land with minute details. Setting the narrative of her works between the crossroads of the past and present, the East and the West, she captures a sense of displacement, alienation and the psychological trauma of South Asian immigrants. Her first-hand experiences as an immigrant in the United States deeply influence her works which reflect the broader theme of immigrant experiences. As a woman writer, Divakaruni presents her depiction of Indian immigrant lives particularly from the female point of view. Her cultural, regional, and traditional consciousness of her motherland and her personal immigrant experiences in her adopted alien land provide a balanced dual perspective of both cultures. Her hybrid identity and dual standpoint about both Indian and American cultural heritages make her a true representative of diasporic writing. As Reena Sanasam states:

The author explores India and and America as two different worlds epitomizing two different cultures, and for the immigrant Indians, new life in America was like 'being thrown into the sea' even before learning how to swim. It is really very new and different setting. For the immigrant Indians, it is a mixed experience too, at one time it acts as a boon that shatters the inhibitions and taboos, with which they have long been associated, and at other time they experience the void and nothingness of a superficial culture. This is typical to all immigrant Indians where freedom does not come without a price. (Sanasam 29)

While addressing the immigrants' psychological turmoil, alienation, and discrimination, Divakaruni takes the perspective of a woman and reveals how to balance the cultural transition. Through her works, she addresses the psychological struggles of women and tries to provide them with a space where their problems are well-understood in the alien land.

Divakaruni's women characters experience the deep psychological impact of migration. In the novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni captures the inner conflicts of her protagonist, Tilo who undergoes feelings of alienation, identity crisis and struggles to find balance while living between two cultures. By exploring the psychological struggles of her protagonist, she brings immigrant issues to the forefront of literary discourse. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni represents different types of characters to highlight the immigrant experiences. The protagonist, Tilo is a mistress of spices and runs a spice shop in Oakland, California. She uses her secret magical powers to help her customers overcome the pangs of displacement from their roots. She provides different spices to her customers not only for cooking but also to cure their trauma of displacement, homesickness, and alienation.

In *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni creates a mysterious and magical world and magical powers to explore several themes and enhance the narrative of the novel. She also incorporates strict rules for the island through the First Mother who establishes several rules. The mistresses are forbidden to look at mirrors and lead a life devoid of personal desires. Divakaruni reveals that these rules are essential in order to maintain the mistresses' powers and control over the spices. It also ensures that the mistresses remain focused on their duties without misusing their magical powers. The rules of the island reveal the importance of discipline and selflessness and duty.

Divakaruni formulates these rules to create a framework that lends authenticity to Tilo's powers and depth to the narrative. She uses magical elements to engage her readers and allow them to the world of mystery which is governed by strict rules and ancient traditions. She uses the rules of the island to explore significant themes within the novel which also serves as a tool to teach humanity to her readers. She represents the theme of selflessness which is multifaceted in the lives of immigrants. One of the prominent notions of selflessness in an expatriate life is the sacrifices he makes for his family and future generations.

Divakaruni shares her desire to serve people through her protagonist Tilo who desires to serve mankind. When she enters the Shampati's fire she lands in Oakland where she is shielded with spices. She loves to use spices, heal her customers and surrender her youth to this service. She understands the reality of life sometimes it pains

but the next minute; she experiences happiness by helping others. Whether it is the East or the West, all people are in search of happiness like immigrants who make sacrifices in search of others' happiness. Many customers of different nationalities visit Tilo's spices shop, with her magical powers Tilo finds out what is running on their minds and their desires so she helps them without their knowledge. She selects the suitable spice for each person and helps them to attain their desires. The revelation and understanding of her customers' struggle through her magical powers help Tilo to get a profound insight into contemporary American society.

Divakaruni uses Tilo's gift of magical power to penetrate the inner conflicts of immigrants. She endows her with an inner eye to capture the sufferings of the alienated settlers especially, the local Indian expatriate community. Through Tilo, Divakaruni dispenses wisdom to the immigrants to withstand the pain of rejection in the United States. Tilo's customers are Geeta, Jagjit, Haroun, Lalita, and Raven who are Indian immigrants undergoing the feelings of alienation and discrimination on the American land.

Divakaruni captures the struggles of the second-generation immigrant, Geeta, a Bengali girl who is caught between tradition and modernity. Her parents' cultural sensibility does not allow her to follow the host culture and expect her to preserve their cultural heritage. This affects her psychological well-being and her relationship with her American boyfriend is almost doomed. Tilo offers turmeric to Geeta, fostering acceptance within Geeta's family. Divakaruni reveals the older generation's intention to preserve their cultural values and highlights their attitude of imposing these values on their children this creates a sense of alienation in Geeta who is caught between the two cultures. Her attempt to keep her relationship with her American boyfriend showcases her effort to connect with these two worlds but her parents view her relationship as a betrayal to their culture.

Divakaruni asserts the process of assimilation through Geeta who struggles to maintain her cultural heritage and embrace the new culture. Geeta's parents' restrictions on her relationship with the American boy show their fear of assimilation. Many immigrants believe that assimilation of a host culture can lead them to lose their cultural identity. However, Geeta's effort to assimilate is not about rejecting her heritage but negotiating her new experiences. This generational difference between first and second-generation immigrants creates conflict in their perspective which showcases the existence of patriarchal oppression even in diasporic conditions.

Tilo offers fennel when Jagjit, a Sikh boy, is teased in school for wearing a turban, his cultural and religious identity of covering his head with a turban makes him a target for mockery. His traumatic experience reflects the broader socio-cultural issues of immigrants. Jagjit's discriminatory treatment over his religious and cultural beliefs reveals issues faced by many immigrant children in alien environments. Divakaruni depicts the character of Ahuja's wife Lalitha to represent the life of Indian women who are under the clutches of patriarchy. Lalita experiences oppression and is trapped in an arranged marriage with an abusive husband. In the United States, she not only experiences the pain of alienation but also undergoes oppressive treatment from her traditional husband. After getting married to Ahuja, she uproots herself from her homeland and follows her husband's footsteps to reach the land of opportunity but experiences horror and disappointment.

In America, Lalita experiences physical and emotional abuse and is expected to fulfil cultural expectations. The cultural sensibility of Indian immigrants does not allow them to accept change and their expectation is no different for Indians in America. Divakaruni observes, "I know better, but still I hoped as women do, for what else is there for us? Here in America we could start again, away from those eyes, those mouths always telling us how a man should act, what is a woman's duty. But ah the voices, we carried all the way inside our heads" (Divakaruni 103). Through Tilo, Divakaruni reveals Lalita's sense of not belongingness and loneliness, when Lalita shares with Tilo her disappointment with her husband, she offers fennel to get mental strength which reflects Divakaruni's assertion that immigrants should understand the adverse condition of the alien soil, and take care of their mental health in order to survive in the hostile environment.

Through Tilo, the mystical mistress of spices' healing process, Divakaruni makes her readers understand the psychological trauma and immigrants' struggles and their traumatic experiences. Her characters Tilo, Geeta, Jagjit, Haroun, Lalita, and Raven navigate the complexities of living between two cultures, ways of life Indian cultural heritage, and American values. The central character, the healer, Tilo uses her mystical power to help others in her community. However, she struggles to maintain her cultural identity and embodies the tension between tradition and modernity. Geeta faces cultural and generational conflicts and is caught between familial expectations and a desire to embrace American cultural heritage. Her life struggles represent second-generation Indian-Americans who have conflicting cultural identities. Jagjit faces the harsh reality of an immigrant's life in a foreign land, his ethnic and religious identity makes him feel alienated and contributes to his psychological trauma. His life illustrates the impact of racial discrimination on young Indian immigrants in the United States. Haroun's feelings of loneliness and isolation and his longing for companionship expose the need of emotional and psychological support for immigrants. Lalitha's battle against domestic abuse within the context of immigrant life represents physical and emotional violence and cultural constraints. Through her struggles, Divakaruni advocates women empowerment. Raven's quest for identity and belonging represents the diverse experiences of immigrants. Divakaruni skilfully uses the magical elements and the healing process to address the psychological trauma experienced by her characters. Her characters' struggles and their journey towards healing represent the broader theme of self-discovery and empowerment.

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