

Diasporic Experience in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

Diasporic writings express the dealings of native culture with the culture of an adopted alien land and bring about changes in the inherited tradition and culture of the immigrant. Immigrant Literature targets the violent experience of displacement in a foreign country for the immigrant. The essential obsessions for the emerging literature of the immigrant incorporate nostalgia as well as guilt for the home land and intergenerational clashes between immigrant parents and American born children.

Key Words

Diaspora, Immigrant, Nostalgia, Alienation

Introduction

Diasporic literature is a broad concept. It consists of all literary works written by the authors, who have settled outside their native country and have written on the culture and tradition of their homeland. In order to discuss the diaspora, a well developed structural configuration is adopted in *The Mistress of Spices*. Each chapter discusses the hardships of an individual. It reveals the uncommon qualities of the spices. The chapters are named after spices. Consequently the reader gets a look into a variety of struggles that encompass the life of the diasporic Indian. Aparupa Mookherjee says, “The role and significance of the spices cannot be overlooked. Spices are the most important characters in the novel. In ancient times it was the spices that lured the West to the East. Actually the whole colonial project started on account of the spices. Thus the spices symbolize Orientalism and exoticism” (82). A little vignette about an individual is portrayed in each chapter. The stories discuss the cultural encounter. It is braided together to express the delicate nuances. The narrations are indebted to literary devices like story-telling. Tilo knits the different lives by variety of cultural codes and icons.

Diasporic life is more complex to alleviate the pain of Indian immigrants. But Tilo is a kind spirit who drifts over Indians living in America. Jagjit, a Punjabi boy is alienated and racially marked. The teacher made him to sit in the last row next to the drooling boy with milk-blue eyes. Kids ridiculed him as he was wearing turban. In the playground they snatched his green turban. They dangle the cloth from their fingertips and laugh at his long, uncut hair and push him down. Jagjit managed himself and picked up his muddy turban and tied it slowly. The immigrants in America are ready to face any assault to follow their heritage. At school, he is mocked at and physically abused. They pull down his pants in the play ground. At school, a ten and half years old timid child is struck for not knowing English, “Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole”(MS39). In this critical situation, Jagjit thinks about his native place at night with his eyes open: “ the stars begin to flicker like fireflies in his

grandmother's *kheti* outside Jullunder. She is singing as she gathers for dinner bunches of *saag* green as his turban. Punjabi words that sound like rain"(MS39). The element of nostalgia can be found through this text. School is a bad dream for him. He is not interested to go to school. And he is rebuked by his impatient mother, "Jaggi what you meaning you don't want to go to school, what for your father is killing himself working working at the factory, two slaps will make you go" (MS39). Tilo gave him cinnamon, friend-maker which will find him someone who will take him by the hand and say, "See this is America, it's not so bad" (MS 40).

One morning he came into the store, Tilo asked him "Are things better now at school?"(MS 119) A long ago expression like timidity vanished from his face. And he answered "yeah, school's cool" (MS 120), big boys take care of me, and since then I never had no trouble. He told they resemble my brothers, they showed me how to wrestle, pointed out the soft fleshy parts, where it hurts most, demonstrated me how to utilise elbow knee and knife. He boasted, "And one day they'll give it to me, cold and black-shining and heavy with power in my hand, pulsing electric as life, as death, my passport into the real America"(MS121).

Tilo's tries to restore confidence in the little boy. He is changed into a vigorous young man who has been given protection by a group of boys. Jaggi was eagerly waiting to turn fourteen, when he will get his desirous gift. Tilo contemplates on what had motivated Jaggi to become a drug trafficker. She is shocked whether it is her spice-remedy or Jaggi's parents or America that had driven him to become an armed gangster.

Some of the stories reveal constant battles within the Indian diaspora of North America, like domestic violence, racial discrimination, intergenerational dispute, and the unending attempt to assimilate and be retained in a new environment. Mohan, a street vendor with his wife veena's

cooking skills had a good day and almost everything Veena cooked sold and many people told it 'tastes good'. One day while closing his shop he heard the steps of two young men very close. Mohan smelled their unbathed odour like stale garlic. He thinks, "How Americans always smell different from the Indians" (MS 169). Even their cologne and deodorant are different.

Mohan told the young men 'Sorry, closed already' and kicked out the stones he wedged under the wheels. The young men moved deftly and blocked his way hitting him and shouted, "Sonofabitch Indian, shoulda stayed in your god-damn country" (MS 170). Mohan, the food vendor is beaten up and crippled for life. This is the pathetic sight of the immigrants in America. In the hospital room he was writhing in pain and moaning, "... will I walk again, how to make a living now, the right eye, is it totally gone, Veena so young and pretty left with a crippled scarred husband... Those two *haramis*, did the police get them, may they rot in jail"(MS171).

There was no justice for the poor immigrants in America. When he heard that the two racist young men were acquitted he screamed with high moaning. He shattered whatever thing he can reach. He crashed the stereo he had saved for so many months to buy. Veena got the assistance of Ramcharan and his brother living in the next apartment. They tried to calm down but finally tied him with a couple of Veena's saris to stop him shouting. He came to America for better prospects but he was reduced to the state of desperation, injured and broken in heart he has to go back to India. Tilo was helpless for Mohan, her spices could not rescue him from his destiny. She cried, "O Mohan broken in body broken in mind by America ... My limbs ache as after long illness, my sari is damp with shiver-sweat, and in my heart I cannot tell where your pain ends and mine begins"(MS172).

There are people who live a life of problems who have no options but to live with sufferings in an alien land as they have no bravery to confront their natives since they have chosen for migration with the prospect of thriving in a foreign land. The choice to be strugglers in an alien land makes them guilty conscious towards their home on the one hand and has punctured pride and respectability on the other. Rahman-saab, a dapper, moustachioed man in a maroon velvet night robe and matching slippers described to Tilo that he was a surgeon in Lahore, army hospital, before he came here. He thought he will be a doctor in '*phoren*', but authorities told, "... take this test, and this one, and this one, and oral examination also. In the exam hall I am not understanding their *taan taan toon toon* American accent, and so now I run my own gas station"(MS 230). To survive in America an Indian doctor changes his profession and runs a gas station. Another problem for the first generation Indian immigrants is language. They are unable to cope up with American accent and face lots of problems. Rahman does his profession in leisure time to Indians. He helps Haroun by stitching his cut and providing pills. Also he gets payment for his profession.

Conclusion

Diasporic authors throughout the sphere are marked for their diversity in approach and their different appeals to the readers. Most diasporic authors focus their works mainly on the life and experience of the immigrants. These diasporic experiences include crisis, a sense of loss, nostalgia, longing for a past land, the urge to connect to a new land, the desire to assimilate with the present country of stay, adapt to its life style and its people, the desire to assimilate or even retaliate.

References

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