

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI: A DESIRE TO COMMUNICATE

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Abstract

The word 'Diaspora' derives from the Greek meaning 'to disperse' (Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction. P-189). In short it simply stands for the displacement of a culture/community into another geographical and cultural region. This displacement is an effect of migration, immigration and exile. The content of the writers is always an attempt to negotiate between the two polarities- exile and homeland. This displacement can take place in two ways- one, it can be for a self-cause that involves a shift for a better livelihood and two, that involves an undesirable reason. This shift can be for various reasons. The experience of dislocation can be apprehended from the books, interviews, journals of almost all the Diasporic writers. Each one of them has stated their own personal sense of dislocation. As Meena Alexander puts it in 'Writing in Search of a Homeland' that how these writings of exiled/immigration writers adopts two moves, one temporal and one spatial. In short this theory of temporal move (analepsis) is to bethink in the past whereas the other develops in looking forward at the future (prolepsis). To bethink, involves a negotiation with a retreating history, past, tradition and customs. It results in nostalgia. The other, prolepsis, stands as a different treatment of time. Here the writer convinces the characters to accept the change and adapts the new circumstances in order to gaze upon the future. The best expression of this dual movement comes in Rushdie's Shame.

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The word 'Diaspora' derives from the Greek meaning 'to disperse' (*Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction. P-189*). In short it simply stands for the displacement of a culture/community into another geographical and cultural region. This displacement is an effect of migration, immigration and exile. The content of the writers is always an attempt to negotiate between the two polarities- exile and homeland. This displacement can take place in two ways- one, it can be for a self-cause that involves a shift for a better livelihood and two, that involves an undesirable reason. This shift can be for various reasons. The experience of dislocation can be apprehended from the books, interviews, journals of almost all the Diasporic writers. Each one of them has stated their own personal sense of dislocation. As *Meena Alexander* puts it in '*Writing in Search of a Homeland*' that how these writings of exiled/immigration writers adopts two moves, one temporal and one spatial. In short this theory of temporal move (analepsis) is to bethink in the past whereas the other develops in looking forward at the future (prolepsis). To bethink, involves a negotiation with a retreating history, past, tradition and customs. It results in nostalgia. The other, prolepsis, stands as a different treatment of time. Here the writer convinces the characters to accept the change and adapts the new circumstances in order to gaze upon the future. The best expression of this dual movement comes in *Rushdie's Shame*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific author and poet born in the year 1956 and has achieved many awards. Born in Kolkata, having spent her first nineteen years in India, she

moved to the United States to continue her studies. In explaining her decision to start writing as her career she remarks, as she was getting her Ph.D., she felt that the subjects she was studying were very disconnected from the reality of her existence. She wanted to write about her own experiences. *Chitra* as an Indian immigrant to the United States, wanting to break free from conventions, used her past experiences and urge to communicate the plight of Indian women in America as the driving force behind her writing. Unable to communicate or sympathize with the situations of American and British authors she was reading, *Chitra* turns her inner consciousness to enroot a new narrative. The writings not only emphasized the oppressive force exerted over women in both their narrative and non- native cultures, but also on how it altered traditions survive and mutate on foreign soil.

The theme of the paper is to deal with an intense analysis of the two novels ***Sister of My Heart (1999)*** and ***Mistress of Spices (1997)*** which has won worldwide acclamation and appreciation. Most of her works are partially autobiographical. The works generally deal with the immigrant experiences, difficulties in adjustment, nostalgia for home, inability to connect on return visits to India, identity crisis, sense of belonging to nowhere become the major assertive feelings of the characters.

The novel ***Sister of My Heart*** deals with the lives of two women named *Anju and Sudha*. The story talks about the situation where these two women got married and how their life changes as one comes to California and the other stays behind in India. The novel discloses the status of their relationship which these two women shared within each other. *Anju and Sudha* were cousins but shared a much closer bond than sisters. Both of them were raised by their mothers and an aunt because of their father's death that occurred mysteriously. Since then these girls accompanied each other during their early years in Kolkata. *Anju* is the daughter of an upper- caste Kolkata family and *Sudha's* the daughter of the black sheep of that same family. Apart from these differences in family and caste, *Sudha* was more beautiful than *Anju*. Unfortunately their lives gets complicated when they hit their mid-

teens, and the compulsory question of marriage emerges. The whole of their lives, these girls grew up inseparable but now they were broken apart in the name of arranged marriage. They were separated geographically. They seek the drill of marrying someone not for love, but for suitability from their mothers. One travels to America and the other remains in India. Neither the horizons could break them apart, nor they overpassed the days and bond they shared with each other. When *Anju* migrated to America she stressed herself and her aloneness scared her. *Anju* started struggling in the friendlessness surrounding. For *Anju*, her marriage became a relationship of real love and affection but involves a displacement. Meanwhile *Sudha*, who's also happily married, gives birth to a son. *Anju's* husband *Sunil*, defines *Anju*, how welcoming America is and encourages *Anju* to "you can be what you want" (*Sister of My Heart*.P-179). In comparison, *Anju* was the brighter one who eagerly anticipated a future whereas *Sudha* was more concerned with the histories of their families. She was closer to *Anju's* mother, *Gouri Ma*, who took care of the whole household more than her own mother, *Nalini*.

This condition is very common to all the immigrants who duals upon the constant struggle between the clashes of tradition and culture. *Chitra* beautifully draws the characters with more depth. The pathetic plight of the characters can be studied through their extreme sense of rootlessness. The constant fear of non-acceptance and companionless made the characters emotionally weak and shattered. *Chitra* has a unique style of communication and often switches the first-person narrative between the voices of *Sudha*, *Anju* and *Sunil*. Before this displacement, *Anju* dreamt of a fanciful life in America which according to her represents enlightenment, freedom and modernity, whereas India representing misery, backwardness and oppression. But later she understood the hateful side of this so called modernity. When *Sunil* had an argument with his father, his father shouts at him saying that this is what America has taught him, and adds, "I wonder how impressed she'd be if she knew about your American exploits, all that drinking and whoring" (*Sister of My Heart*.P-183). *Anju* reflects the attitude of acceptance here. The displacement often causes

absorption of incorrect practises. The dual sensibility of immigrants is strange, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one self from the perspective of past brings them to a standstill position. Migration doesn't only mean moving across the boundaries, it also develops a movement of ideas. The idea of acknowledgment and embracement plays a vital role in the lives of these women. One can't always cling to the traditions and customs of their selves. To prosper, one needs to accept the reality and has to move beyond their lives and prolonged disjuncting from their homeland. *Chitra* through her characters mirrored us the harsh reality that stands as a result of migration.

The next part of this paper will talk about the other novel ***The Mistress of Spices (1997)***. This novel is a bit unique that it is written with a blend of prose and poetry. The novel opens up with a simple, yet declarative statement, - "*I am a Mistress of Spices*" (*The Mistress of Spices P-3*). *Chitra* puts up the question in order to provoke her readers to find an answer to the question, and this makes the novel stand matchless. The novel deals with a story of a modern immigrant but the background is magical, sensual and mystical. The story recites about a young woman born in another time in a faraway place, and is trained with ancient art of spices and has been blessed as a mistress charged with super powers. To serve the spices she's given a condition that she has to leave her own form and journey to another time and live in the body of an Old woman in Oakland. In the first chapter itself, this woman introduces herself - "*My name which is Tilo, short for Tilottama, for I am named after sunburnished sesame seed, spice of nourishment. They do not know this, my customers, nor that earlier I had other names*" (*The Mistress of Spices. P-5*). *Chitra* wonderfully speaks about the day when *Tilo* was born. Through the character's narrative, *Chitra*, gives us a magical backdrop about the day when the village witnessed "*steel-blue thunder, and jagged lightning that split the old banyan*" and how "*the midwife cried out at the veiny purple cowl over my face and the fortune-teller in the rainy-filled evening shook his head sorrowfully at my father*" (*ibid. P-7*). She was named "*Nayan Tara, star of the eye*" (*ibid. P-7*). *Chitra*

describes the birth as a bitter experience and quotes *"but my parents' faces were heavy with fallen hopes at another girlchild, and this one coloured like mud"*(*ibid.* P-7). The unfulfilled love from her parents and negligence breaks her desire to live and one day *Nayan Tara* throws herself in the sea after hearing of a magical island of spices from two amicable electric eels, and act of desperation incited by the desire to find a better place in the world. But isn't this incident a very common phenomenon every year? *Chitra*, through her heartbroken experiences quotes, *"Each year a thousand girls whose hands have failed them throw themselves into the sea as they sail home. Because death is easier to bear than the ordinary life, cooking and washing clothes and bathing in the women's lake and bearing children who will one day leave you"*.(*ibid.* P-35) Not everyone is as lucky as *Nayan Tara*. The girl was accepted by the *Old One*, a grand ancient figure who rules over the departure of the apprentices, who, after fielding a vision, select a destination. They then passed through a cleansing, transmogrifying flame, *Shampati's* fire (*ibid.* P-5), to the location where they set up a shelter, a store, from which they bestowed their learning yet magical gift of physical and spiritual healing both through the sales and complimentary distribution of spices. Before they leave, each apprentice must choose a new name, one rich in meaning and apt in appropriateness. This process of choosing name isn't only for giving them their new identity but is also suggestive of badging them to be someone, a new identity in a " *New World*". The name *Tilotamma*, wasn't a choice for the old one and the old one disregarded her choice as well, but *Tilo* was the only name she has chosen for herself. The old woman recites the myth of *Tilotamma*, saying,- *"Tilotamma, disobedient at the last, fell and was banished to earth to live as a mortal for seven lives, seven mortal lives of illness and age, of people turning in disgust from her twisted, leprous limbs"*(*ibid.* P-48). On hearing the myth, *Tilo*, with a youthful ignorance relied, *"But I will not fall, Mother"*(*ibid.* P-48).

The story evolves with a series of smaller sections where *Tilo* is seen dealing with the families and solving their problems like a God sent. The first Patron she's introduced was *Ahuja's* wife *Lalita*. The victim *Lalita* tells *Tilo* how she wanted to break free from the

confines of Ahuja and set up something by her own. *Chitra*, through *Lalita*, speaks about the very common phenomenon of every woman suffering out there. Loneliness and silence is like a plaything for an immigrant where life is somewhere always in a clash with the chaos. The desire to do something is always interrupted by the “bitter-half” as in a conversation *Lalita* tells *Tilo*, how her man “refuses that this woman should work”(ibid. P-15). *Lalita* sees a baby as a means of escape from aloneness. So this woman is given “turmeric” who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas and asuras churned for the treasure of the universe, but as the ancient descriptions echoes the aftermath of consequences that follows, here *Lalita*, also has to face some of the bigger fallouts. The most important and surprising element of this novel is the use of culture and myth in a splendid manner. *Chitra* aptly uses the *Spices* in all the stories. Through *Tilo*, *Chitra*, confesses the drawbacks of a culture, which can be sometimes beneficial whereas sometimes can be harmful. Everything on earth has two faces, which has to be thoroughly studied in order to avoid the consequences. The next patron *Tilo* comes across is *Jagjit*, the shyboy, now called as *Jag*, who’s suffered brutal tortures for his turban and accent. *Jag* has fallen into the chaos of America and now he’s involved in some gang related activity and drugs. The mother of this boy, *Geeta* is trapped within the confines of fear, and prefers to keep silence about the perception of a bad mother. The scene is very common in the lives of the immigrants. The children are mostly the victims of this chaos. The thin line between good and bad is barely implied and this occurs because of the differences in culture and lifestyle. *Tilo* gives this mother a *hartuki*. Shrivelled seed in the shape of a womb to help her bear the pain that starts with birth and continues forever. The third patron that *Chitra* brings in is a cab driver, *Haroun*, who’s still in loss, “mental peace I am not having, not even one iota, since I crossed the *kalapani* and came to this America.... better to have no granddaughter than one like this *Geeta*”(ibid. P-87). *Geeta* has eventually adopted the culture of America and has started behaving like them. Her grandfather is worried because of her alien behaviour, and complains about her for buying makeup and expensive cars instead of saving for her

dowry. Geeta's parents are angry on her disrespectfulness towards her own culture. Geeta wants to marry someone of her own choice, who she loves and to her love is blind. Geeta believes, her parents are not regarding her emotions and so she won't regard them too. *Tilo* for the first time walks out of the store for meeting *Geeta* on *Haroun's* (grandfather) request, "Today I plan to stretch my wings, to crack perhaps these shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the outside world. It frightens me a little. I must admit this" (*ibid.* P- 133).

Tilo's initial step away from the store arouses a feeling of homelessness that drives her feet even further from the building as she search for freedom and place. Her adventure takes her into a world where "in the sirens begins to wail, reminding us how fugitive happiness is" (*ibid.* P-73). This realisation brings out the sense of fear and melancholy in America. *Tilo* was reborn in her identity twice before landing to America, first as a plaything for the pirates and second as a mistress of spices. The interesting turn comes to this story is when *Tilo* fell in love with an American Indian, *Raven*. Initially *Tilo* mistook *Raven* as an American and warns him about the food's spiciness which might be very hot for a white man's mouth. But *Raven* tells him the history of his mother ran away from her own cultural mind-set to marry his father. *Raven* also tells *Tilo* his opinion about his mother's decision. And he clearly thinks that his mother took a very selfish decision in leaving such a rich, aboriginal culture for the bland homogeneity of American society. The story tells us about *Tilo and Raven*, how they got connected and bonded in love with each other. In spite of all the warnings *Tilo* got from the *Old Women*, she couldn't control her desires and temptations. *Tilo* is worried about the consequences she has to face, if she chooses to go with this American Indian. Enamoured by *Raven*, and with the idea of transforming her being into a startlingly attractive woman, *Tilo* sets her resolution to consume *makaradwaj*, "to break the final, most sacred rule of all" (*ibid.* P-277). to request beauty and youth from the spices. "The laughter of the spice is low and deep, but not unkind" (*ibid.* P-277). They liked this very fact that *Tilo* did follow their mistress along the path of self- awareness and even though they never accepted the desires of the representatives, they did for a night in *Tilo's* case. In the

final lines of this novel we will come across anxiety *Tilo* sensed, thinking about the grief that *Shampati's fire* will bring to her. But in that silence, she sees the spices' punishment. They discarded her to suffer in America alone. *Tilo* is dumped to live in this coldblooded world as an old woman, without power, without livelihood, without single one to whom she can seek for a company.

Chitra has distinguished herself as one of the prolific novelists in the genus of South Asian diasporic literature and also presents a model with which we can better understand the processes through which minority identities are constructed. *Jhumpa Lahiri*, whose books carry cordial consents from *Bharati Mukherjee* and *Chitra Divakaruni*, readily acknowledges the importance of networking. *Jhumpa* accepts the fact that these diasporic writers do share a bond which constructs strength between them. They get an inspiration from each other. Exploring the constitution of the relationship between identity formation and the negotiation of desire, *Chitra* marks crucial moments in each of the characters' lives with references to significant current events. *Chitra's* style is convincing and can be communicated easily. The characters allow a sense of unfocused and unwelcomed. Her characters undergo through psychological conditions and her narratives include numerous images derived from the traditional customs.

The narrative confronts the theme of native dominance but supports the ideal that- they themselves can plot the relationship between immigrants and assimilation with race and class differences subsumed under the charge. *Chitra*, substantiate the culturally transcendent quality of literature- an oxymoron which represents a binary opposition between reality and imagination. The writer very beautifully reflects the insights into the life of an immigrant and the journey of struggle for accepting the new culture.

The very concept of acceptance is only a way to get out of this crisis but the new world never treats you back like one of them. What was unspoken is left expressed, proving that absolutely opposed immigrant writers do have a voice.

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