The Hybrid Space and Fragmented Self in Chitra Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

Our globalized world is marked with intense cultural encounters of all kinds leading to the dismissal of the ideas of class, caste, religion and culture as artificial constructs. The emergence of multicultural literature celebrates cultural hybridity. Cultural intermingling results in redefining the borders of nation and foregrounding the marginalized voices. Immigrant women characters populate the American mainstream literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has proved her mettle as one of the most prolific and vociferous voices of Asian American immigrant women. In *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni explores the diasporic condition against a multicultural backdrop. The protagonist Tilo comes across many characters representing vivid identities of diasporic life like scattered identity, marginalized, rebellious, docile, traditional and modern. The novel propounds deep rooted multiculturalism in its portrayal of cultural diversity, culture conflict, racial tensions, alienation and integration of the migrant subject into the multi-ethnic American society. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explores the impact of altered space upon one's consciousness in the colonial context. In place of a double consciousness, the women of her texts develop multiple consciousnesses resulting in a self that is neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented.

Key Words: Hybridity, Racial Conflicts, Space and Consciousness.

The Indian Diaspora plays a significant role in reflecting the complexities of diasporic experiences in literature. The women writers such as Bharati Mukherji, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and kiran Desai have portrayed the cultural dilemmas, complexities of discrimination, assimilation, social and demographic change, generational differences, and transformation of their identities during displacement. They are deeply attached to their centrifugal homeland and caught physically between two worlds. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's female protagonists are memorable and real representations of diasporic Indian women. *The Mistress of Spices* appears as a form of cultural carnival, representing different communities and their intercultural and intracultural relationships.

Set in spaces - physical as well as mindscape, divided by continents and cultures, Divakaruni's plots feature women of Indian roots torn between old and new values. Her writings centre on the lives of immigrant women - women in love, women in difficulties, and women in relationships. She strove to capture the complex and baffling psyche of the south Asian women in America in a manner akin to Du Bois's "double consciousness". The very foundation of Du Bois's double consciousness is the conflict between the act of perceiving oneself and the self-

perception influenced by others. As the women perceive their race and sexuality through new and different lenses they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is a fallacy. The reality of the South Asian diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity and this multiplicity is a significant plight for the characters, for their different consciousnesses contradicts each other.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the process of self-perception is the foundation of identity formation for the central character Tilotamma. As Tilo strives to define herself as South Asian and American, she develops multiple consciousnesses in both her experiences and her subsequent relationships with her racial and sexual identities. The story begins with the initial adventures of the protagonist in search of an independent identity. After her training as a spice mistress she enters into her new role of administering spices to the expatriate Indians in Oakland. She has carried ancient secrets from her culture to the new world, secrets she obtained through an intensive and highly specialized training. As the owner of the spice shop she encounters different people. Working under certain restrictions she has to depend solely on her customers to construct a view of the American social life.

The role and significance of the spices are crucial. Spices are the most important characters in the novel. The term "spices" and the charm associated with it immediately conjures up images of the Orient. The author's emphasis on the curative powers of spices can be perceived as an attempt to unfold the richness of a culture, marginalized and suppressed by the colonial hegemony. People of different ethnic and religious backgrounds flock to the store to fulfil their individual needs. Thus Tilo meets Lalita, Jagjit, Daksha, Haroun, Kwesi, Raven, Geeta and the bougainvillea girls. She gleans out their problems, and provides the appropriate spice to encounter joys and sorrows, struggles and hardships, hopes and frustrations.

Divakaruni portrays the cultural diversity without bias and stereotypes. Several subaltern voices emerge in the course of the narratives which are legitimized by the author. The shop is frequented by many non-Indians who come in search of spices. This universality of the spices assign a cosmopolitan character; they act not only as taste enhancers but also cure the maladies of a multicultural society. Indians residing in the bay area of Oakland exhibit their Indianess unconsciously in their dress, food habits, values and ideology. Tilo herself is a metaphor for the young Asian woman caught between tradition and modernity, duty and love.

The spices manifest a traditional conservatism and at the same time empower and enslave Tilo. She herself would never step out of her store to venture into the American society as she has vowed abstinence from worldly desires. A string of plastic mango leaves is hung across the entrance of her spice store to ward off evil. Lalita who prefers to be called Ahuja's wife dare not go against her husband's wishes to pursue her vocation. Ahuja reflects the ideology of the Indian male for whom woman is the "other", socially and intellectually inferior to take the right decision about her life. Daksha's mother-in-law observes "ekadasi", a typical Indian religious rite for a widow.

Geeta's grandfather will never come to terms with his grand-daughter's liberal ways. Haroun never fails to attend the namaaz in the masjid. Inspite of staying abroad for years Geeta's parents cannot brush aside their prejudice against inter-racial marriage.

Racial tensions and conflicts surface at various points in the narrative. Tilo first confronts conflicting perceptions of herself through her experiences with race and class, both of which are inextricably linked together in South Asian formations of identity. Misbehaviour and assault arising out of racism are common among the white population who regard the non-whites with contempt. Haroun, the taxi driver, falls victim to their wrath. The 10 year old Sikh boy, Jagjit, is regularly bullied by the white boys of his school. Mohan, the food vendor, is beaten up and crippled for life. This racist attitude of the dominant culture is a challenge to a multicultural society which subverts the stability of the monolithic white structures. Tilo soon realizes that the South Asian in America is considered neither white nor black in American society, but rather a race in-between, depending on one's particular class.

The complexity of Native American community's intracultural relationship is portrayed through Evvie and her folks. Evvie hides her native identity and transforms into Celestina. The revelation of Raven's fractured identity changes him altogether: "I became a different person. My world was like a bag turned upside down, with all the certainties shaken out of it" (210). He is now faced with a difficult choice of either passing as a mainstream White American or embracing the different culture of his native folks. He turns away from the materialistic world symbolized by the American culture to the spiritual world represented by his rich aboriginal culture.

Divakaruni forcefully foregrounds the marginalized voices which had remained so long unheard. The final identification of Raven with the mythological bird helps him to find his spiritual counterpart in Tilo. Again Tilo renounces her magical powers to become an ordinary woman who finds her new space in her union with Raven. Breaking free from the fetters of tradition she re-discovers her true self in Maya. Without giving up her Indian values altogether, Geeta accepts Juan. Their bonding gives rise to a particular kind of hybridity which becomes an integral part of the American culture. The earthquake towards the close of the narrative symbolizes the destruction of the established order and a crumbling of the geo-political-cultural world where the hegemony of the West prevails. This interracial consolidation can be seen as a tool to combat racism and to resist the dominant, homogenizing culture.

Divakaruni's other female protagonists like Jayanthi in "Silver Pavements and Golden Roof" (*Arranged Marriage*), Sudha and Anju *in Sister of my Heart*, Uma and Malathi in *One Amazing Thing* find their true identity through integration and hybridization. Speaking about gender portrayals of Divakaruni, K.S. Dhanam writes:

Divakaruni's books are directed to women of all races and faiths who share a common female experience. All her heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their cultures and religions . . . it includes the Indian

American experience of grappling with two identities. She has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos . . . Her sensitivity to contemporary voices, today's issues are threaded through an ongoing search of identity beyond anthropology, beyond sociology and beyond academia"(62).

The Mistress of Spices draws largely Post-Jungian analytical psychology. An uncanny encounter between an Indian "mistress of spices," a young woman hidden in the disguise of an old recluse, Tilo, and a socially successful descendant of the First Nations, Raven, goes well with the Jungian sense of the conjunction of the opposites. The novel thus plays with the binaries that do not exclude one another.

As part of magic realism Divakaruni formed such a character like Tilo who is born in India. Though hailed as the "Mistresses of Spices" she is beneath the control of the First Mother who gives her a knife, which Tilo believes is "...to cut my moorings from the past, the future. To keep me always rocking at sea (51)". The First Mother represents the traditionalist notion of the South Asian woman in the domestic sphere and at the same time, one outside the boundaries of conventional culture, for she lives on an isolated island, possesses magical powers and urges the young girls toward progression and change rather than the maintenance of the status quo. She is at once the old world and the new, a juxtaposition of differing geographical spaces, times and cultures.

Tilo has entered a state of liminality, a space between the past and the future and without a precise knowledge of the present. The Island is the first diasporic space which exhibits the same liminality and ambiguity as America does. Tilo is transported to America by means of "Shampati's Fire," a giant fire into which she steps and disappears. Divakaruni is foreshadowing the process of Tilo's identity formation, using the fire as a metaphor for the recreation of the self and presenting identity as erratic rather than permanent. Tilo enters into her new life upon the remnants of her old, with life and death inextricably linked together just as they are for the phoenix. Tilo's moment of "self-perception" occurs after she questions the prohibition of mirrors for Mistresses. Tilo realizes that in place of a unified identity she possesses an identity of multiplicity and ambiguity. The transformation back into the body of the old woman further reinforces the notion that identity is not a question of cohesion. When Tilo returns to the body she experienced the different perceptions of race and sexuality; she is in essence accepting her fragmented selves in place of a unified identity.

Tilo is thrust into the chaos of American life and for her the entire notion of "home" becomes displaced and transformed into an intangible condition that is not based on a singular location but rather a movement among many places. When Tilo arrives on the Island, she and the other young girls are given new identities, indicating that the past is being relegated to memory and new personas are being forged. Tilo is thus placed in yet another interstitial space. In America, Tilo interacts with all genders, identifying with both her male and female customers and friends alike. As her relationship with her lover Raven progresses, Tilo finds the past

inescapable, for the possible warnings of the First Mother constantly plague her present consciousness: “The spice's silence is like a stone in my heart, like ash on my tongue. Through it I can hear back to long ago, the Old One laughing bitter as bile. I know what she would say were she here” (36). Tilo feels unmoored spatially, for America is only a temporary place for her; it is her home sofar she fulfills her duty as a Mistress of Spices. The first time when Tilo exits the comfort of her store, she experiences an intense wave of longing for a place to call home: "I run my hand over the door, which looks so alien in outdoor light, and I am struck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness"(36).

Frantz Fanon explores the impact of altered space upon one's consciousness in the colonial context, describing the experience of existing in such a liminal space as:

Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty...A slow composition of myself as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world-such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world - definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world" (40).

Tilo’s understands of time and space results in the creation of a schema in which her existence relates to these constructions through a dialectic of mentality and physicality. Time and space are no longer solely corporeal locations (past or present, continents or nations) but rather states of being that are intertwined with her consciousnesses, spanning numerous locations and incorporating the presence of various spheres simultaneously.In the stories of Tilo, Haroun, and Jagjit the characters transform physically, psychologically, and emotionally. A postcolonial perspective is crucial to illustrate elements of the immigrant experience in twentieth-century America. Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory deals with elements such as discrimination, ambivalence, and hybridity which are relevant to these experiences. Childs and Williams claim that, “Post-colonial cultures are characterized by a decentring movement, a subversion of universals and unities, in a diversity and hybridity that permeate their past and condition their present” (218).

The metaphoric function of the spices and the body parts through which the spices applied are linked to the present situation of the dislocated immigrants, which historically is a result of colonialism. In *The Mistress of Spices*, we learn that spices have functions beyond that of just adding flavour to our meal. The spices in Divakaruni’s novel can cure a wound, they can help one survive, they can evoke love, and last but not least, they can heal one from nostalgia and homesickness. Each chapter is named after one particular spice and each explores how that spice has a unique name, one major function, several other functions, and how, as Tilo remarks, “each spice has a day special to it” (13). The spices can be seen as a representation of Indian culture and help Indian immigrants in the process of integration and emancipation.

The period between detaching oneself mentally from the previous home and attaching to a new home is

characterized as 'the unhomely moment' by Bhabha. The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence. Haroun deals with the traumas of being an immigrant who is in the 'in-between' phase and belongs neither to his old environment, nor to his new surroundings. Kraniauskas reflects on Bhabha's interpretation of the colonial past and explains: "The colonial past as interpreted by Bhabha thus illuminates the postmodern present, the crisis and critique of enlightenment, paradigms and narratives—especially ideologies of progress—all of which were implicated in colonialism (121). Haroun seems to carry Kashmir's colonial past with him during his immigrant experience and comes to Tilo for mental and emotional healing from this haunting colonial history. The spice chandan helps him to relive painful, tragic experiences of Kashmir and create space for Haroun to build his life. The spices cardamom, cinnamon, and clove are meant to help Jagjit gain friends, and arouse his mother's understanding for his situation. Thus for Jagjit wearing a turban has lost its very meaning in his new environment. Kraniauskas refers to Bhabha's point who claims; "Culture only emerges as a problem, or a problematic, at a point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of everyday life, between classes, genders, races, nations"(118).

Suedfeld gives an adequate description of the symptoms of trauma in his analysis of societal traumas: "Traumatic stress will be defined as an experience that invalidates one's normal assumption of order, predictability, safety, and identity" (850). This description is applicable to the characters Tilo, Haroun and Jagjit who indeed experience traumatic stress because of the imbalance caused through dislocation. These characters' assumption of what is common becomes vague in their new cultural environment. Also their safety is not secured in America where they face new threats such as discrimination and violent robbery. The physical damages they suffer are made explicit in the novel through different events. For example, Haroun transforms psychically because he is beaten up by the burglars; Jagjit transforms in his psychical appearance through acquirement of ghetto American garments and dress code; Tilo's transforms three times. First she is transformed into old women, then into an exquisitely beautiful woman, and at the end she is transformed into a common women in her thirties. These physical transformations have impact on the characters' identity and on their perception of their identity.

Tilo's journey to the outside world starts with her forbidden longing for *the American* and his attraction to the real Tilo under her disguise. In Bhabha's opinion "colonial stereotypification is the uneasy, anxious result of the recognition of difference, the generation of fear and attraction, and its negotiation through denial" (120). Slowly this attraction arouses new wishes in her. She has always been jealous of the bougainvillea girls, but this jealousy multiplies itself because she starts envying them. This is Tilo's 'recognition of her difference' from the normative values in the American society. Before *the American* appears in her life, Tilo negotiates with her difference by simply ignoring it. But the fear that *the American* will not like her appearance

forces her to transform in order to be found attractive by him.

The bougainvillea girls are daughters of rich Indian families who have totally assimilated American culture. Ralph Singh's quoting in *The Mimic Men* is appropriate in this context: "We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World" (128). Most of the bougainvillea girls are Americanized with little knowledge of Indian culture. According to Tilo, these girls have been mimicking American women, which position her as their antonym. The circle of mimicry takes place between Tilo and the bougainvillea girls. The bougainvillea girls imitate American lifestyle, and Tilo in her turn wants to imitate these girls, which is Tilo's indirect mimesis of American women.

The consequential loss of her heritage makes it difficult for Tilo to choose between her love for *the American* over her love for the spices. An interracial relationship for Tilo seems to be more difficult because she is firstly restricted by her culture, and secondly by her promise to remain the mistress of spices all throughout her life. Tilo's culture is part of herself since she represents Indian culture. The losses of Indian culture thus mean partial loss of herself. *The American* on the other handrepresents American culture. So basically, Tilo has to choose between her own culture and the American culture. Tilo wants to integrate into American society, but does not want to lose her own identity in exchange of complete assimilation with American culture. Tilo gets her freedom back and is no longer the mistress of spices. This same intimate moment is also the moment of her hybrid union with *the American* which symbolizes the union of Indian and American culture.

When Tilo perceives herself as Raven's idealized Indian fantasy, she becomes subject to a specific form of racism that gained much attention during the 20th century. "Orientalism," Edward Said says, is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and the Occident'. In his relationship with Tilo, Raven falls prey to describing and categorizing her based upon his knowledge of her race but without a true understanding of her actual identity. Raven thus becomes the quintessential orientalist described by cultural scholar and writer Anwar Abdel Malek: "According to the traditional orientalist, an essence should exist-sometimes even clearly described in metaphysical terms- which constitutes the inalienable and common basis of all the beings considered" (61). Raven believes that Tilo possesses an intangible "essence" that makes her an "authentic" Indian as compared to the other young Indian women in the store. In thinking about Raven, Tilo says: "You have loved me for the colour of my skin, the accent of my speaking, and the quaintness of my customs which promised you the magic you no longer found in the women of your own land. In your yearning you have made me into that which I am not" (290). Tilo herself falls prey to a sort of "reverse Orientalism"- she begins to view Raven as a representative of American culture. From the moment she meets him, she refers to him not by name, but rather as "my American". While Raven views her as his Eastern exotic fantasy, Tilo comes to see him as her token American lover.

The spice store run by Tilo is a microcosm of India. The store with its "sacred, secret shelves" (5) functions as a geographical space, a repository of a monolithic national identity. To the expatriate Indians it is reminiscent of their homeland. Tilo gets involved in their lives, for she is the "architect of the immigrant dream" (28). She administers kalo jire, fenugreek, asafoetida, cardamon, ginger to help her native folks to face life with new challenges and hopes. Jagjit joins Kwesi's karate classes, Lalita leaves home and an abusive husband to join a battered women's shelter, Geeta is reunited with her family who are no longer hostile to Juan, and Haroun finds new hope and happiness. Thus they find contentment overcoming their problems and cultural barriers and to promote love and understanding among people. They are able to create a new space for themselves – a common diasporic space.

The novel closes with Tilo renaming herself Maya, a name that can mean many things, a name that embodies the multiplicity of her identities, the many consciousnesses that lie within her. The title itself is ironical. The power exercised by the spices over the Mistresses proves that she is not the mistress of the spices but the other way round.Divakaruni's work deals with the immigrant experiences which is an important theme in the mosaic of the post-colonial literary landscape. Tilo, Haroun, and Jagjit initially hold on even tighter to their Indian origin instead of facing the dilemma's that come with the process of immigration. They eventually acknowledge that there is no other way then to adjust both cultures to one another. They learn to select elements of the new and the old culture to create a new hybrid culture.

The novel also illustrates the process of acculturation and hybridization of the world of immigrants. In world literatures food is often presented as an internationally connecting factor because everyone can relate to food and yet it is extremely culture specific. This novel teaches that the immigrant experience can be successful through the union of different cultural values. Divakaruni's inquiry into transculturalism cuts through the Indian stereotypes and presents the reader with powerful allegories of transformation and change. She explores the grim realities of urban decay within a framework of magic, pirates, enchanted islands, Indian mythology and the mystical powers of spices and herbs.

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