



Research Paper

The Mistress of Spices: Memory and Cultural Preservation

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ABSTRACT: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific writer. She has authored many novels, short stories and poems. Some of her novels have been adapted into movies. She is a diaspora, who immigrated to California at a young age. Being a diaspora she got an opportunity to witness two entirely different cultures. Being born and brought up in Calcutta, in a conservative environment, she learnt about rich Indian culture but migrating to Alien land gave her an opportunity to see beneath the surface and she could easily detect the ills and vices in Indian society, where women are considered as second, their identity is always seen with respect to males. So, the writer decided to break all those norms and portrays her female protagonist as a stereotype breaker. During this journey of her protagonist Chitra has shown memory playing a vital role. The present paper will explore the role of memory in culture preservation.

KEYWORDS: Immigrants, Indian Culture, Stereotype.

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In the novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Chitra has blended past of protagonist and other characters (in India) and present (in California) beautifully, the technique followed for narration is first person narrative and stream of consciousness.

The novel *The Mistress of Spices*, opens with the introduction of Tilo, the protagonist who is running a store in California, where she sells Indian sweet meats --mithai, rasogullas and laddus. The writer has acquainted the reader with Indian sweets. The reader comes to know about her past, through her stream of consciousness, Tilo remembers, that her birth was not celebrated by her parents and through this, the reader is acquainted with the gender bias in Indian society.

Her parents soon realize that the girl has supernatural powers i.e. the powers of fortune-teller and by showing this, the writer wants to emphasize that in eastern world people believe in fate and fortune. In Chitra's another novel the Queen of Dreams, (2004) her protagonist is a fortune teller, who helps her clients with the help of her dreams.

Tilo's powers bring a lot of wealth to the family, but for Tilo, it brings discontentment as she realizes that her parents do not love her. Soon, she gets bored with this monotonous life of a fortune teller and starts yearning for a new life, Pirates pillage her village and she is abducted. Later on, she with the help of her supernatural powers, overthrows the leader of pirates and herself becomes the pirate queen. She is named "Bhagyavati" by them, that is maker of destiny, which is contrary to the belief of Indian society. In *Manu Smrithi*, Manu gives a compendium of codes for woman in Indian society:

Pitta Rakshati Kaumaree, Bhartaa Rakshati Yauvanee;

Putroo Rakshati Vardhakyee, Na Stri Swaatantryam Arhati.

"Bhagyavati" throws herself in water as she realizes the futility of accumulating wealth. Inside the water she meets the snakes, who have magical powers. The writer acquaints the reader with another Indian belief i.e. in the deep water sits the Nagraj, who protects a big treasure. Tilo is offered to become "Visha Kanya" again new myth is brought to fore by the novelist, according to ancient belief, vishkanya were the women, who were raised on poisonous venoms and had the power to kill enemies through their bodily fluids.

It is the snakes who tell her about the magical island. Tilo herself possesses such powers but when she hears of the magical powers of the island and the old mother, who governs the island, Tilo becomes curious about it.

India is believed to be a land of mysteries, due to its various cultures and vast area. Tilo soon becomes her disciple and learns the mysterious art of healing with the help of spices, besides her own powers of peeping into the psyche of individuals.

Tilo attains the status of mistress of spices, and has to choose her place for helping humanity, Tilo chooses California over Indian settlement and by making her protagonist choose a foreign settlement, Chitra is beautifully able to show transition between past and present. The novelist is also able to show role of memory and culture in the life of immigrants.

In the beginning, Tilo does not cross the threshold of her store, whatever information she has of the outer world is through the customers. The boundary of the store is the ethnic boundary, that the immigrants build around them. In the store, the story progresses forward through the stream of consciousness of Tilo and other characters of the story, who visit her store. Majority of her customers are immigrants.

Language is a cultural identity marker and by this the novelist shows that though the immigrants want to assimilate in the host country but they also want to retain their cultural identities. Jagjeet a Sikh boy, speaks in Punjabi, Haroun, a Muslim speaks Urdu, Ahuja's wife and Geeta's grandfather speak in Hindi. The story moves forward through Tilo's communication with the customers who visit her store. She has made use of different languages as per the culture of her customer. It is after communicating with them and seeing in their psyche that Tilo comes to know about their respective problems.

Tilo's customer is introduced as Ahuja's wife. She has a name: "Lalita, three syllables perfect suited to her soft beauty" (14). But who prefers to be addressed as "Ahuja's wife" since the society in which she is born, sees the identity of women in context to their husbands after marriage. When the mistress peeps into Ahuja's wife psyche, she finds that Ahuja's wife has a desire to open her own shop—Lalita's Tailor shop which will help her to become independent. Tilo suggests her to start stitching work as a lot of people in America also need stitching. She is not able to decide. According to Jana Matson, "in India a woman is considered to be an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge". (Everest 1981, p.76)

Tilo realizing her plight, hands over Turmeric, an antidepressant to her, halud i.e. "[T]urmeric, who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas and asuras churned for the treasure of the universe, who came after the nectar and before the poison and thus lie in between" (14). Spices also play a cultural role in the novel as they are not only used for flavouring the food but stories are related to them in the east.

When Ahuja's wife, revisits Tilo's store, she remembers her past and narrates the same to Tilo, this how memory and culture come into play. She tells Tilo that she belonged to a Chaudhary family. Through this the author wants to highlight the caste system prevalent in Indian society, she also narrates the way in which her family was befooled by her husband, by sending his fake photographs, but for the reputation of her family, she married him. In Indian society preference is given to family's reputation and individual happiness comes later. Simone De Beauvoir accounts: "Feminists say that marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society". (Beauvoir, 1983, p.445). Finally, when she is unable to stay with her abusive husband, who assaults her, she shifts to a battered house, she realizes that the *Lakshman Rekha*, (meant for safety of women) does not dissuade women from taking right decisions for themselves. Jain rightly comments: "There is a need to move beyond the 'given' that is the gender constraints, the socio-cultural inheritance, the body as such, to move beyond the margin, the subordination, the captivity, the loss of will, plain and simple surrender. There is a need to move towards self-realization and freedom and establish new relationship with the self as well as with the other" (Jain, 2003, p.285)

Through Jagjit, a Sikh boy, the novelist shows the yearning for adaptation and the hurdles faced by immigrants in the host country. The first hurdle in the path of adaptation is the physical appearance. Jagjit is a turbaned Sikh. Turban is a symbol of his cultural identity. Sikhs are required to wear five external signifiers: kes or kesh (uncut hair) kanga (wooden comb) kara (wrist bangle), kirpan (small dagger or sword) kacch (cotton undergarment) and he is continuously mocked at for his turban and his accent. The boy feels uncomfortable and continuously yearns to go back to his cultural roots, "At night he lies with his eyes open, staring until the stars begin to flicker like fireflies in his grandmother's kheti outside Jullunder. (41) The remembrance of their homeland is a source of comfort for immigrants in the host country. Tilo seeing his plight through her super power, tucks cinnamon to his turban. Cinnamon, dalchini is an anti-depressant. The colour of cinnamon is brown and it has a sweet taste. She wants that a brown-skinned boy should have a sweet life ahead in an alien country. Skin colour is also a cultural identity as South-Asians are referred as brown-skinned in foreign countries. Cinnamon is a friend-maker, which will show him the bright side of America and will help in adjusting comfortably in the foreign country.

Chitra has introduced a Kashmiri in a very skillful manner, rather than introducing the character first, she beautifully gives a glimpse of Kashmir to her readers, when Haroun enters her shop, "carrying the scent of pine wind and akhrot, the crinkled walnut from the hills of Kashmir, where he was born" (26). Haroun is a Muslim, who migrated from Kashmir to California because of the terrorism there and has a hope to build a bright future in California. He is haunted by the horrifying memories of terrorism that took place in Kashmir

when he was residing there. When the mistress gives him to rub “sandal wood”, Chandan to his palms, he narrates his story. It is about destruction of Kashmir and fleeing of people like him.

One night rebels. In our lake village. Came to take the young men. Abbajan tried to stop them. Shots. Echoing over water. Blood and blood and blood. Even grandfather who was sleeping. Red Silk of shikara turning redder. I wish I too I too.... (28)

Not only does he highlight the plight of Kashmiris but through his remembrance of it Chitra acquaints the reader with the Urdu and Hindi words spoken in Kashmir-- like shikara (a small boat) and abbajan (referring to father).

When he comes to America but has to face racial -discrimination She wants to hand-over protective sheath (that is a packet of *Kalojeero* which is an antiseptic) to him as she wants that the wounds on Haroun’s mind should heal quickly and he should assimilate in the new world fully.

Geeta’s grandfather is Tilo’s client who comes to Tilo’s shop to seek her advice. He tells Tilo, that Geeta (a second-generation immigrant) being born and brought up in America, has adapted to American ways and he does not approve of it. She does all the things which are considered as taboo in the Indian society that is coming home late. He says that in India, people would have taken this behaviour of hers in negative terms “they would have smeared dung on our faces and we would have faced difficulty in finding a bridegroom for her” (88). i.e. contrary to the west in India women are not given excessive freedom, Tilo refutes the view saying that girls are working in India also: “But dada, this is America after all, and even in India women are now working, now even in Jamshedpur.” (88). This shows the conservative view of Indians, where social ties play a major role in decision -making. When Geeta’s grandfather complains about Geeta’s behaviour to Tilo that she applies make-up, she had a hair-cut, she has purchased a new car though the old-car was in fine condition.

The grandfather is of the view that the real place for a girl is her husband's house. He is not able to adjust himself according to the American lifestyle. He says to the Mistress:

But mental peace I am not having, not even an iota, since I crossed the Kalapani and came to this America... Better to have no granddaughter than Geeta. (87)

His problem is that Geeta has chosen a Chicano boy for herself, and her parents, who are first-generation immigrants are strictly against it. Although many parents may worry about inter racial marriage for it might imply for them in old age [...] the task of inculcating young, second-generation girls in their role as keepers of culture consists of rejecting dating, and accepting the traditional practice of arranged marriage by presenting the latter as essential to ‘Indian’ ways. Any move towards independent sexual choices, especially by young women, is labelled “Americanization” and is posed synonymous with unprincipled and immoral behaviour. (Dasgupta,1985,p. 122)

Tilo meets Geeta advises her and hands over a bottle of mango pickled in mustard oil into which she adds “methi(fenugreek) for healing breaks and ada(ginger) for the deeper courage which knows when to say no, and also amchur for deciding right” (146). Through the story of Geeta and her grandfather the novelist wants to show the difference in opinion between the first and second -generation immigrants, while the second-generation immigrants are flexible the first- generation immigrants do not want to loose their cultural ties, but in the novel Geeta’s family decides to meet the boy.

The protagonist not only helps in the assimilation of other characters but is trying to assimilate herself in the host country, like other characters she also faces hurdles in assimilation. She also yearns for her homeland and compares it with the host country she does not hesitate to highlight the shortcomings in her homeland but similar shortcomings and vices are prevalent in the host land too. She also raises a point that an individual is a product of its culture as culture has a big impact on the person’s way of thinking and shaping his life, as

when the protagonist Tilo herself makes a mistake of breaking rules, she makes a penance for it. Penance holds a special significance in Indian society, where it is believed that penance purifies the soul and makes an individual guilt free. At the end of the novel, earthquake hits California, she decides to stay back rather than escaping. In Indian tradition selfless service is held supreme.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni believes that one should never loose ties with his/her cultural roots as these are the basis of our whole being and they act as guiding lights for an individual whether, he stays in a homeland or host land.

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