LOOKING THROUGH THE MIRROR OF DUAL-SELFHOOD: THE SHIFTING CONTOURS OF TRANSNATIONAL HYBRIDIZED IDENTITY IN THE NARRATIVE OF DIVAKARUNI

Dr Aditi Abhishikta

Associate Professor

Department of English,

Basic Sciences and Humanities,

 BITS, ANDHRA PRADESH

Deviating from the conventional research-based methods of numbers and percentages the narratives provide experiences of people and lives in close quarters. The exigencies, struggles and changes manifested within the characters in the stories go parallel with the readers who see the paradigm of their self-identity in a large scale and try to draw remedies to their wounded lives. Literature thus, embeds the consciousness that has a greater flexibility in the context of life and society more than any sociological or anthropological approaches could do. The general idea about the formation of one’s identity is that it is associated primarily with parents and other individuals during one’s biological experiences. According to Erikson (1970) an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. Identity crisis is an important and indispensable aspect of human predicament which women writers have tried to analyze, explore and resolve in their writings.

Creativity finds itself flourishing, being occupied with one’s individual self and also with the other. Intermingling the pros and cons of life, the traumas, challenges and anguish, the creativity ultimately paves the way for open spaces rather than enclosures. This intermingling is the key value or element in evaluating the experience of diaspora. There is a strange kind of experience possessing a double vision and the agony of being come apart, working through a unique history, culture and a diluted reminiscence featuring the fragrance of diaspora, its experience and the feeling of Indianness.

*The Mistress of Spices* (1997) was the debut novel of Divakaruni contributing to the literary world a unique piece of ineffaceable impression. It is a mixture of immigrant sensibility, dilemma between duty and desire, love, magical realism, conflict between tradition and modernity, women psyche, identity and herbs.

Her characters are the inheritors of the Indian-American hyphenated community, a new identity to accommodate and assimilate. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is firmly rooted to her culture and by her continuing existence in the American soil, she assimilates the new cultural lifestyle, the fusion of both the cultures. Divakaruni states in an interview with Joan Smith in the San Francisco Examiner Magazine:

I think that in some way being an expatriate made me want to write, because it is such a powerful and a poignant experience when you live away from your original culture and this becomes home, but never quite, and then you can’t go back and be quite at home there either, so you become a kind of outsider to both cultures. Which is hard, but very good for writers, I think to be in a position of looking in from the outside observing. (Divakaruni)

Confrontation with the west for the discovery of one’s own self is evident through the character of Tilo. This search constitutes a quest for a satisfactory attitude towards the west, and for a realistic image of the east. The fusion of the western and eastern cultures is beautifully brought out by the novelist.

The novelis crafted on individuals negotiating their colonist experience while interrogating the existence of the self, and Divakaruni dexterously “builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and the community” (Merlin, 1998).

Phillipa Kafka has appreciated the skill of Divakaruni In her book, *On the Outside Looking In(dian): Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad* (2003) has expressed that she is one of the diasporic authors who “write eloquently on the issues that arise either for them or for their characters in the West” (26). Kafka trails the expansion of Tilo and perceives that when the young Tilo meets with the sea serpents as Bhagyavati, they show their unwillingness to part with her: “They predict that if she does not remain with them, everything she possesses – the ability to see, to speak, her name, even her identity will be lost” (Kafka 158).

Such assessment of identity perseveres throughout the story. Kafka identifies those tussles and discovers them on level of self, sexuality, and relationships with others. She proclaims that such issues are forcefully and efficiently revealed on an individual level by Divakaruni:

In highly poetic language within the context of a feminist myth based of Tilottama, Divakaruni conveys the feelings of all the characters, their problems in their everyday existence. (Kafka 163)

One of the means through which Divakaruni trades her story line and the probing of the different facets of immigrant experiences are to engage her own unique form of personalized magical realism. There are various rudiments of realism and mysticism exhibited instantaneously by postcolonial authors in their stories. Gita Rajan in her article “Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* Deploying Mystical Realism”(2002) mentions such prominent authors as Gabriel Garcia Marquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Laura Esquivel (*Like Water for Chocolate*), Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*), and Divakaruni as models of authors who develop magic realism to really associate traditions and modernity, myth and cultural history, in a single chronicle.

Rajan identifies that Divakaruni, nevertheless, has not made those associations in efforts that are explicitly engrossed on imposing goals of socio-cultural levels. Rather she affirms that Divakaruni deals more with the individual:

By not attempting to effect huge changes through the usual tropes of history, politics, and fantasy as magic realism would, Divakaruni is able to work on a smaller scale and address the psychological needs of her disempowered cast of characters. (Rajan 217)

Rajan also asserts that the characters - principally Tilo - are represented as multifarious and intricate, symbolizing of their position as diasporic individuals caught hold in the struggle of existence both internally and externally. In the words of Rajan, “The characters themselves are not fully fleshed out; it is their hopes, desires, and pain that makes them recognizable as typical diasporic, exilic, marginalized, damaged figures” (219).

At the backdrop of such frenzied existence, Rajan remarks how Divakaruni concentrates on the central character, making her best efforts to “sequentially alter Tilo’s name or identity to match the shifting contours of the plot” further augmenting the focus on the individual and identity issues (218).

In the article “Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor’s *Mama Day*,”(2003) Susana Vega-González also deliberates the kind of magic realism to which Rajan was pointing out, but refers to it as ‘ethnic magic realism’ in order to particularly qualify it as the contribution of diasporic women authors who “pay tribute to their ancestors and their childhood cultures” (10).

In the threshold of magic and the real verge, Divakaruni depicts the chief character Tilo as an amalgamating of “a series of opposites in a symbolic undoing of boundaries: young and old, human and otherworldly, life and death” (Vega-González 4). Those opposites along with the notion of boundaries are reconnoitered all through the story, and are symbolic of a “dual selfhood” (4). Vega-González speaks that the ‘ethnic magic realism’ eventually offers Tilo an occasion for resolution: “At the end of the novel, Tilo’s dilemma is resolved,” Vega-González clarifies, when Tilo attains “a transnational hybridized identity” (5).

*The Mistress of Spices* has been perceived by many as a modern fairy tale in which ‘real life’ is illustrated in a beautiful, nearly mystical way. Cristina Bacchilega in her article, “Genre and Gender in the Cultural Reproduction of India as ‘Wonder Tale’ ” in *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (2004) opines that *The Mistress of Spices* is an illustration of a contemporary saga of magic that involves the reader in myth and a perpetuation of India as a “wonderful” land while simultaneously perplexing boundaries (179).

Bacchilega mentions the need of such study since she considers that perceiving India as “wonder tale” continues to “play a significant role in the transnational conception and reception of some of the most successful literature of the South Asian diaspora” (180). She further asserts that “both Bengali storytelling and the immigrant experience are thus represented by a singular and mythicized retelling”(187). According to Bacchilega, the accomplishment of *The Mistress of Spices* is unswervingly associated to the limitations or the boundaries that are crossed in the novel and the applicability of the story to numerous cultural minority groups:

[D]issolving boundaries not only applies to globalization
as a whole but also speaks directly to the building ofcoalitions between different yet equally stereotyped groups–for instance, in the novel, between Asian Indians and American Indians. (187)

Inderpal Grewal has contributed a chapter titled “Becoming American: The Novel and the Diaspora” in *Transnational America; Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005).This chapter offers a detailed comprehensive analysis of the role of diasporic literature and its position in multicultural American society. It has taken into account three Indian English novels. They are *In an Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh; *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee; and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

In the beginning of the presentation in the chapter, Grewal proclaims that Divakaruni’s novel “participated in this transnational circulation of knowledge of Asian women, but it did so to eroticize and romanticize the notion of ‘tradition’”(39). Grewal further has mentioned the issue of identity by considering the existence of the ‘old’ in the novel as India and the ‘new’ in the novel as America (78). She goes on to meritoriously credit *The Mistress of Spices* squarely in association with the American “consumer culture and its search for the exotic” (76).

Another scholar, Wilfried Raussert observes the presence of food in *The Mistress of Spices* and has mentioned this in his article “Minority Discourses, Foodways, and Aspects of Gender: Contemporary Writings by Asian-American Women”. Raussert affirms that to Divakaruni, “the whole question of what it means to be a woman is aligned with the question of what it means to be Asian American” (186). Furthermore: “Food transactions and responses to foodways in Asian American women’s texts function as important commentary on various ways of establishing multiple feminine identities” (186).

Analyzing thoroughly, in *The Mistress of Spices*, Raussert identifies several ways in which Divakaruni “resorts to food as a trope for redefining female identities” (195). Raussert believes Divakaruni is at the same time discovering the delineation of Indian-American women and the way in which they deal and react to relationships of power. He also strongly opines that she “breaks through the simple binary opposition of colonizer and colonized in her gendered discourse of immigrant experience” (199). In her prudently shaped narrative, Raussert considers that Divakaruni attains something which much of diasporic literature is endeavoring:

[Asian American] women writers provide us with tropes on a narrative level that stimulate further critical investigation into the interrelation of discourses on minorities, gender, and globalization. (200)

Since conversations are spawned by probing literature, it is significant that Divakaruni’s literary creative be read carefully that unveils various conscious issues on the concept of self and individual identities.

Identity is a frequently explored theme in most of her works in general. Exemplification of individual fractured identity issues as well as a close realization of the self is such concepts which are powerfully present as thematic elements in her novels. Explicitly in *The Mistress of Spices*, it is through disintegration that Divakaruni often detects struggles and elucidates distress. Intricate, disintegrating understandings of persons in diaspora efficiently and powerfully exist in the novel along with persistent engagement of fracturing in terms of language, structure, imagery and character.

WORKS CITED

Bacchilega, Cristina. “Genre and Gender in the Cultural Reproduction of India as ‘Wonder’ Tale”. *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches,* Edited by Donald Haase, Detroit, MI, Wayne State University P., 2004, pp.179-195.

Bauer, Erika. “A Discussion with Chitra Divakaruni”. 1993. ebStudios.com. www.ebstudios.com/oldsite/homespun/poetry/divakaruni.html

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices.* London, Black Swan. 2005. (All the references to this edition are parenthesized within the text)

Espin, Oliva. *Women Crossing Boundaries:83 A Psychology of Immigration and Transformations of Sexuality.*1st edition, Routledge, 1998.

Erikson, E.H. *Life* *history and the historical moment.* New York, Norton, 1975.

---. *The Concept of Identity in Race Relations*. Daedalus, 1966.

Guha, Ranajit. “The Migrant’s Time.” *Post Colonial Studies,* vol.1, no. 2, 1998, pp.155-160*.*

Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America; Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms.* Durham, Duke University P., 2005.pp.39-76.

Grewal, Inderpal. “Women’s Rights as Human Rights: Feminist Practices, Global Feminism, and Human Rights Regimes in Transnationality.” *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1999 pp.337-354.

Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. *An Introduction to Women’s Studies: Gender in a Transnational World.* 2nd edition, Boston, McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2006, pp.190-194.

Johnson, Sarah Anne. “An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.” *Writing Outside the Lines,* vol.117, no.3, 2004, pp.20-23.

Kafka, Phillipa*. On the Outside Looking In(dian): Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad*. New York, P. Lang, 2003, p.26,p.163.

Merlin, Lara. “World literature in review: Asia & the Pacific.” *World Literature Today,* vol.72.1, 1998, p.207.

Poddar, Prem, and David Johnson, *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literature in English*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University P., 2005.

Parikh, Indira J, and Pulin K. Garg, *Indian Women: An Inner Dialogue*. New Delhi, Sage, 1989.

Rajan, Gita. “Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* Deploying Mystical Realism.” *Meridians,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2002, pp. 215-236.

Raussert, Wilfried. “Minority Discourses, Foodways, and Aspects of Gender: Contemporary Writings by Asian-American women.” *Journal X,* vol.7, no. 2, 2003, pp.183-204.

Smith, Joan. “The Spice of Life”. San Fransisco Examiners Magazine. 16th February 1997. pp.7-10.

Vega- Gonzalez, Susana. “Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor’s *Mama Day*.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture,* vol.5, no.2,2003, pp.2-10. www.lib.purdue.edu