

# Hunting Facets, Identity Crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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## Abstract

*Acclaimed Indian - American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works chiefly deal with the existential quandaries of expatriates tackles two problematic areas of contemporary post colonial theory - "Diaspora and 'Identity' This paper focuses on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress of Spices".*

**keywords:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Post-Colonial, Theory/Discourse, Diaspora, Facets, Identity, Indian and American Cultures, Expatriates.

"Diaspora" (meaning "to disperse" in Greek) is a major area of current post-colonial discourse. "Diasporas, the voluntary or forcible movement of the people from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonization" (Bill, Griffiths & Tiffin 1998: 68-69) European imperialism first initiated the process of Europeans migrating to colonies and later resulted in the colonized migrating to the homelands of the colonizers or other colonies. The Indian diaspora is now a vital and inseparable part of American life, culture, and literature. Indian - American writers have made a simultaneous and substantial contribution to both Indian and American literatures. Their writings are a testimony to the complex blending of East and West, convention and modernity, Indian traditions, and American independence, especially in the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States.

As Jasvir Jain writes Expatriate writings occupies a significant position between cultures and countries. It generates theory and defines positions as it constructs a new identity that negotiates boundaries and confines and relates to different temporal and spatial metaphors. Cultures travel, take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia. Writers living abroad live on the margins of two societies and cultural theory are today being created by people who live on the margins. (Jain 1998:11)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (born as Chitralakha Banerjee in 1956) is an acclaimed Indian - American writer based in Houston with her family Born in Kolkata, she

moved to the States for her higher education. A prolific and versatile writer, she has won several prestigious awards for poetry, short stories, essays, and novels. She writes for both children and adults and her fiction cover multiple genres - realism, history, magic realism, and fantasy.

Divakaruni's works which chiefly deal with the existential quandaries of expatriates tackle two problematic areas of contemporary post-colonial theory - "diaspora" and "Identity" The Indian diasporic community is one of the most heterogeneous especially about race, religion, a region on the other hand, in a virtually endless attempt to bridge the gap between native and adopted cultures. "The word 'diaspora' is a scattering carrying within it the ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee..... While one requires the projection of one's culture and the ability to enhance its understanding, the other seeks refuge and protection and relates more positively to the host culture" (Jain 1998: 11-12) Drawing on her own rich experience as an immigrant, Divakaruni projects the struggle, rootlessness, and anxiety as also the adaptation and assimilation of foreign cultures by the Indian Diaspora.

This paper focuses on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's popular novel "The Mistress of Spices" which is the spirit that hovers over Indians living in America. But for Divakaruni, assuming the pain of diasporic life is more complex. Jaggi (Jagjit) is estranged and racially marked. A timid child, he is assaulted at school for not knowing

English. As a result, he becomes a drug trafficker, who is perhaps on his way to becoming an armed gangster.

Mrs. Ahuja's story is a story of dispossession. She leads a comfortable life at her father's house, but she is married to a violent man, an alcoholic who abuses her. So, she suffers from a psychic problem. There are two reasons for this problem. She is brutally raped night after night by her husband. The second reason is she is childless. She feels that the problems she undergoes are not possible to bring to her father's knowledge. She has burnt her skill of embroidering on account of her displacement. Lalita leaves her husband and seeks refuge at a battered women's shelter.

For Geeta, Tilo mixes several ingredients, ginger for deeper courage, fenugreek for healing breaks, and 'amchur' for deciding right. Geeta's predicament stems from the fact that she is part of a paradigmatic diasporic family, where a clash between the first generation and second generation. South Asia is inevitable. Her parents have 'given' plenty of Independence, but they cannot accept her boyfriend. They are horrified that, she would choose to be with a Chicano man and cut her off completely. Geeta, the second-generation South Asian is not prepared for this volt face, she is shocked by the elements of reaction to Juan. Discussing the conflict between generations in the American Diaspora, Sunaina Maria and Rajini write "The relationship between the generations is complex and nuanced. Second-generation South Asians having come of age in a post-Civil Rights era, often refuse to be treated as other by the mainstream culture at the same time many questions to uncritical acceptance of the need for assimilation".

The dispersal of Indians around the globe has been a multi-layered and multi-centered phenomenon, so Indians from a range of socio-economic backgrounds on the

subcontinent have translated themselves into other hierarchies of rank and status in their adopted societies. Tilo's customer Harouna, a Muslim driver comes to her asking for his future hoping that his poor status will be raised. She gives Black cumin to protect from evil, and red chillies to cleanse the evil from the city.

Tilo, the mistress of spices is the quintessential dissolver of boundaries, moving between different ages and the world and the communities that people them. As a migrant in both space and time, she can fully participate in neither world nor able to get to the magic of total power and freedom on one island.

The cross-cultural and cross-world relationships here addresses the problematic issues of ethnic diasporic positioning, where communities meet with the host country. Tilo is beneath her old woman's body. Raven urges her to run away with him to live a pastoral life away from the problems of urban American is an "earthly paradise".

This novel is able to manipulate social space through her experience of magical realms beyond normal experience, in order to create new multi-ethnic and emotional configuration within the inter-racial communities of urban America.

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