



Old and New Dimensions of Immigration Perspectives through the Lens of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract:-Immigration narratives have been a crucial aspect of literature, reflecting the complexities, struggles, and triumphs of individuals navigating new territories and cultures. This study delves into the perspectives on immigration presented by acclaimed author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Anita Rau Badami. Both authors bring a distinct lens to the exploration of immigration, weaving intricate stories that highlight the multifaceted experiences of immigrants.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works, such as "The Mistress of Spices" and "The Vine of Desire," often depict the immigrant experience through the lens of magical realism, blending elements of fantasy with the harsh realities faced by immigrants. Divakaruni's protagonists grapple with issues of identity, belonging, and cultural assimilation, navigating the complexities of dual existence while striving to preserve their heritage in a new land.

Through an analysis of Divakaruni and Badami's works, this study aims to explore the evolving dimensions of immigration perspectives. It examines how these authors navigate themes of displacement, nostalgia, cultural hybridity, and the quest for belonging in their narratives. By juxtaposing the old and new dimensions of immigration experiences portrayed in their literature, this study seeks to shed light on the diverse ways in which immigrants negotiate their identities and forge new lives in unfamiliar territories.

Matrix of Dislocation and Relocation

In the immigrant literature, geographical locations carry a significant position. The geographical shift of location, generates the psyche of exile, empathy, rootlessness and marginality. The creative writers have tried to investigate the anguish and discontent of the new settlers wandering in the distant land carrying at the back of their mental map the lingering shadows of home



culture with the desperate urge to seek roots in alien cultural surroundings. Bill Ashcroft observes, “Whether it remains permanently disabling or whether it becomes beginning of transformation of colonial discourse is a pivot moment in post colonial cultures; since displacement turned into creative resistance.” (Ashcroft : 3) This displacement in spite of the possibilities of creative energy, generates a fractured consciousness in the life of immigrants. Dom Mores in his analysis of the experience of immigrants concludes that the idea of home is in itself an illusion. He admits, “He has become desireless in so far as determining his desired point of location in the world.” (Mores : 340) In this reconstruction of double consciousness, writers find themselves struggling between two cultures, “born under the one law, to another bound.” (Parmeswaran : 15) The novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Anita Rau Badami are the narrative reconstruction of the aesthetics of ‘location’ and ‘relocation’. In the state of relocation, the immigrants develop the positive acceptance of assimilation against the nostalgia of homeland. However the realization of otherness’, the loss of identity and the passion of homeland constitutes the psyche of alienation. Prof. S.K. Sharma, admits that in immigrant literature, there is often “a celebration of pastoral and elemental simplicities and home spun emotional reality. (Srawan Kumar: 17) The writers who are concerned with the predicament of the community of minorities in multi-cultural scenario of India have adopted a distinctive pattern of life in which immigrants make efforts to search out new ‘homes’ to escape the agony of “homelessness” in their own homes. Such immigrants are doubly marginalized and suffer with greater loss and nothingness. The immigrants from minority community persistently redefine their self and identity both within their homeland and the land of their adoption. Anita Rau Badami and Chitra Banerjee deal with the perspective of location and dislocation in a distinctive manner.

The novel *The Mistress of Spices* written by Chitra Banerjee is basically a novel constructed on the lines of magic realism. It is said, “*The Mistress of Spices* is a dazzling tale of misbegotten dreams and desire, the hopes and expectations, woven with poetry and story teller magic.” (Amytan) Still in the background of myth and romance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been successful in presenting a wide spectrum of the experiences of immigrants. It is a story of Tilo, a young woman born in another time in a far away place. She is trained in the ancient art of



spices and ordained as a “Mistress” charged with special power of magic related with spices. The immortal Tilo with the passage of time travels to Oakland, California where she opens a shop of spices. She administers spices for her customers with exceptional curative advice. However unknowingly she develops romance with a handsome stranger. This diversion in her personal life forced her to make a choice between the supernatural life of an immortal mistress of spices and the vicissitudes of modern life. In this novel Tilo’s store of spices has become the meeting ground for the immigrant customers. They come there as customers but they share the pain and anguish of the experience of immigration. The entire novel is classified with the names of different spices and their related properties. In the early part of the novel, Tilo reveals her own past and her history of migration from the world of magic and romance to the opulence of America. As a Mistress of spices, she tries to share the trauma of immigrants who had chosen America as a land of their dreams. She expresses her mission, “It seems right that I should have been here always, that I should understand without words their longing for the ways they chose to have behind when they chose America.” (5) Regarding the mission and purpose of the store, she confesses, “The store is an excursion into the land of might — have been. A self indulgence dangerous for a brown people who come from else where, to whom real American might say.” (6) With the power of spices, she intends to remove sadness and suffering of immigrants. Tilo unconsciously seeks a fulfillment for her dilemma of dislocation and displacement in her spice store. Chitra Banerjee tries to establish that fragmentation of past affects our consciousness and it hinders the process of cultural assimilation. This fragmentation affects the responses towards the native culture as well as the culture the country of migration. It is said, “Space and Time takes on a complex significance because they are not fixed dimensions. There is an interplay between the memory of “there” and the time of “here”.” (Yocum: 1996, 222)

In the galaxy of Tilo’s customers, the first reference is made to Ahuja’s wife who is young and beautiful. She is not satisfied with her life in America. She was married to an American only because of the attraction of American’s wealth and prosperity. Like other immigrant woman, she is lonely and isolated. She suffers with the feeling of homelessness. Tilo shares suffering of Ahuja’s wife as an immigrant. She is a victim of cultural apathy and male domination. Tilo records:



All day at home is so lonely, the silence like quicks and sucking at her wrists and ankles. Tears she cannot stop, disobedience tears spilled pomegranate seeds and Ahuja shouting when he returns home to her swollen eyes. (15)

Like other immigrant women Ahuja's wife tries to seek the fulfillment of her life in motherhood. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* prepares a very emotional and poignant situation to dive deep into the consciousness of women immigrants. Tilo has a realization of the pain of immigrants who survive in a state of perpetual homelessness. She confesses, "Their pain stung like live coals in my chest as the pirates flung me onto the deck of their ship, as we took said, as the flaming line of my homeland disappeared over the horizon. (19) Tilo recollects her own journey, how she was thrown on Dal Lake and was forced to row Shikara for tourist from America. For her also, America was the land of Exotica and great hopes. She mentions, "great things will happened to you in this new land, this America." (25) In her power of magic and in her ability to understand the dilemma of immigrants, Tilo finds exceptional self confidence. She defines her identity, "I, Tilo architect or American dream." In American sojourn she redefines her cultural identity. It is said:

In the age of Diasporas, one's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of immigration. (American Dreamer: 4)

In her association with Haroun, Tilo expresses her indignation of the apathy of Americans for Third World Immigrants. Divakaruni establishes that immigrants survives as marginalized community. She comments, "All these rich people they think they're still in India. Treat you like janwaars, order this, order that, no end to it and after you were out your soles running around for them, not even a nod in thanks." (30) Tilo has a realization that she has to step into the forbidden concrete flore of America where she will have to survive in isolation. Chitra Banerjee like other Diasporic women writers, articulates in her books "the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and here (U.S.A.) and show them emerging at least in many cases as stronger and self reliant women." (Kamath : Interview) In the store house of Tilo, Jagjeet another immigrant appears to seek relief for his pain. He requests Tilo to make him stay with her and to understand



the nature of the reality of American life and society. The store of Tilo always remains full of customers coming from the cross sections of the society. For these customers, Tilo's store becomes a center to realize and establish their own position as Indian's. There is a joy, excitement and contentment in the mind of these immigrant customers. Tilo admits her own reaction on the sensibility of immigrants. She admits :

It is not as if I haven't seen American. They come in here all the time, the professor type in tweed with patches on jacket elbows or in long skirts in earnest earth colors. Here Krishnas in wrinkled white kurtas with shaved heads, backpack - footing students in seldom laundered jeans, left over hippies lankhated and beaded. (69)

Among the customers, one of the customer Kwesi appears there with the dreams of childhood. Infact Tilo's own consciousness divides in two. For her the power of magic seems insignificant in comparison of the poignancy and loneliness and suffering of her customers. A voice echo in her ears, "A Mistress must carve her own wanting own of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serve." (71) With such emotional affinity, she develops her fascination for Haroun. It is her first involvement in personal relationship. In absence of the customer, she used to wander inside the store aimless, sad and dissatisfied. She identifies all her sentiments and love with Haroun and calls him "my lonely American." The intertextual analysis of the novel, reveals that the identity of "American" becomes the manifestation of the identity of all American immigrants. Tilo mentions that on Saturday evening there is a whole rush of Indian immigrants on her store with different voices and different dreams. She said, "So many people on Saturday, it seems the walls must take a deep breath just to hold them in. All those voices asking for more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where." (81)

Tilo longing represents the persistent longing for homeland existing in the mind of immigrants. Divakaruni seems to convey that distance of geographical and cultural locations



contribute to set an angle to view reality. Tilo as a Mistress of Spices remains an onlooker to perceive the reality of the life of American immigrants. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni confesses:

Moving away from a home culture often allows a kind of disjunctive perspective that is very important — a slight sense of being an outsider, being out of place.
(Interview Bolick)

In Tilo's list of immigrant customers, she makes a reference of Geetha and her grand parents. The conservative grand parents calls Geetha Fringi and they do not permit her to work in American society. The grand parents survive in America with Indian values and Indian mission. They are helpless to compromise the liberal and emancipated ways encouraged in America. They contemptuously remark "Arre baap, so what if this is America, were still Bengalis. And Girls and boys are still girls and boys, ghee and a lighted match, put them together and soon or late there is going to be a fire." (88) They criticize the makeup of Indian girls in American society. In order to resolve the crisis of the life of Geetha, Tilo tries to convince her that the assimilation in American life is possible only through a fine balance of American and Indian life. The immigrants must try to reconcile the past and present, the east and west, and the liberal and conservative. Geetha and her grand parents represents the two extreme sides of American life and sensibility. Tilo exhorts:

Geetha who is India and America all mixed together into a new melody; be forgiving of an old man who holds on to his past with all the strength in his failing hands." (90)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in his reconstruction of the experiences of immigrants accepts that racial prejudices are also integrated in the consciousness of Indian immigrants. When the grand parents came to know that their daughter Sheela is going to marry a white man Juan Cordero, they contemptuously comments, "You are losing your caste and putting blackest kali on our ancestors faces to marry a man who is not even a Sahib, whose people are slum criminals and illegals." (92-93)

In *The Mistress of Spices*, through the suffering of Ahuja's wife Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni exposes the double marginalization of immigrant woman. Ahuja's wife retains her Indian values as a wife and daughter and after coming to America, she becomes the victim of worst horrors. The anguish of Ahuja's wife affirms that the geographical shift of spaces can't bring consolation in the life of a woman. She expresses her thanks to Tilo with the realization, Silence and tears, all the way to America, Bloated sack of pain swelling inside her throat until at last today turmeric untied the knot and let it out." (107) On such confession, Tilo expresses her deep concern for Geetha because in her frustration, she finds the reflection of her lost love. However in the opulence of America. Tilo also for a while forgets her web of magic and starts entering in the America world. The fascination of Indian Immigrants for American life has distinctively been appreciated by Tilo. It is not only the celebration of the private fancy of Tilo but a ruthless exposé of the black desires existing within the consciousness of immigrant. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tries to establish that the fault lies not in American life but also in the vision and dreams of Indian immigrants. Tilo expresses her fantasy in the following words:

A mirror, a colour TV so that I may see into the heart of America, into the heart, I hope of lonely American. A make up kit with everything in it. Perfume of rose and lavender. Shoes several pairs in different colours, the last ones red as burnished chilies, high heels like chisels. Clothes and more clothes - dresses pant suits sweaters, the intricate wispy mysteries of American feminine underwear. And last of all a bed robe of white lace like raindrops caught in a spider's web. (138)

Against these lurking fantasies, Tilo was warned to step over the threshold of "prohibited American." In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni proceeds with exceptional care to expose the ideas of dislocation and relocation. Tilo's power of magic was like a cover to escape the horrors of dislocation. She was prohibited to seek involvement of love and other relationships. It was a warning to her, "Don't let America reduce you into calamities you cannot imagine." (148) However, Tilo finds it difficult to escape herself from the involvement in the personal relationship with all Indian immigrant. In this quest for personal relationship, she even



forgets her own personal desires. With a heavy heart, she admits, “Perhaps one day American I will be able to tell you of it. I, Tilo who has until now been the patient listener, the solver everyone else’s problems.: (163) One of the immigrants confesses how American always smelt different from Indians. Another immigrant Mohan feels himself distorted at the face of the apathy existing within American life. Tilo confesses that she has tried to compensate her distorted self in the form of spice store. Referring Mohan and another immigrant Tilo admits, “Oh Mohan broken in body broken in mind by America, I come back from your story in pieces find myself assembled at last on the chill floor of the shop.” (182) For Tilo, the company of Haroun was a process of self discovery. Divakaruni seems to be convinced that Immigrants to survive with the burden of Divided Identity along with the pain of inferiority. Tilo survives in this divided Identity. She pathetically splits Kalo Jira seeds for all who have suffered from American life. She excises her magic for investigating the suffering of the immigrants. Tilo’s decision to leave her magic world and to enter into the life of immigrants in general and in Haroun’s life in particular is her symbolic effort to have a merger in American life and sensibility. Like the other immigrant writers of second generation, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni accepts that the sentimental planting in the homeland is no panacea for immigrants. She tries to convince, “Too let I begin to see the price. I have unknowingly paid for each step I took into America.” (193) Her excessive impatience for the company of Haroun suggests that the involvement in personal relationship is the only possible solution to seek spaces in American life. In his growing passion for Haroun, she finds an exceptional nervousness because she still finds herself caught in the promises of life. At this juncture, Tilo’s feminine sensibility overcomes all other considerations. She confesses, “Ah! My American At last I have found someone with whom I can share hoW it is to live the Mistress life that beautiful terrible burden.” (216) Against her personal desires, the mother of magie haunts her and prevents her from being involved in American life. However, Tilo is confident that her involvement with Haroun is the only possible method to escape the burden of the past. She admits, “There was no other way, believe me. This land these people, what they have become, what they have done to — Ah, rocked in the safe cradle of your island, now can you understand.” (250) Chita Banerjee Divakaruni does not favour the idea of relocation in the native soil. In one of her story she



admits, “Things here aren’t as perfect as people at home like to think. We’d though We’d become millionaires. But it’s not so easy.” (Divakaruni Arranged Marriage 43)

For Tilo, it was not only the question of the involvement in the life of Haroun but also the life of all those with whom she could have shared her pain of displacement. Through the mental crisis of Tilo, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights that man cannot live in isolation in other cultural surroundings. With deep depression, she confesses, I feel their names moving through me, bubbles of light, all these people I love in opposing ways. Raven and the first Mother, Haroun and Geetha and her grandfather also. Kwesi, Jagjit, Ahuja’s wife.” (257) By the end of the novel, all associated Indian immigrants realize the power of the spices and power of the magic of Tilo. Tilo also unites with Haroun. It was not a union of two individuals but it was the union of two cultures, two countries and two contradictory currents of thought. Haroun intends to give a name to Tilo different from all those names that are the marker of national identity.

In this context, she prefers to choose the name “Maya” because that is the only solution to come out of the illusion of duality existing within the consciousness of immigrants. Defining the implication of word Maya, she admits, “In the old language, it can mean many things, illusion, spell enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day, I need a name like that, I who now have only myself to hold me up.” (338)

It has been observed :

Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humour as well as pathos underline her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined medium between the preservation of old world and a simulation into the new one. (Parekh: 197)

Divakaruni is convinced that Immigrants can’t escape the impact of the shadows of nostalgia. The lingering impressions of memory appears as the integral part of consciousness and they essentially contribute to determine the responses of the present. Anju’s mental crisis in Sister of My Heart echoes the vision of M.G. Vassanji, “We are but the creatures of our origins



and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, sacking new worlds, the ghosts from our past stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off. (Vassanji 9) The guilt is rooted in the consciousness of Anju. As the time passes, she starts thinking in terms of motherhood. Anju's withdrawal to her mental spaces and private world of femininity is her withdrawal from the strangeness of American society. At the time of pregnancy, she is anxious to share her personal feelings with all other members of her family staying in Calcutta. Anju develops an obsession for the company of Sudha. In spite of free and liberal ways and the best medical care, Anju survives with her own insecurity. She finds that her liberal American thoughts are of no avail to settle her problems. She interrogates herself, "Still I can't stop thinking of what Sunil said. Did I push Sudha into making the wrong decisions, misled by my American feminist notions of right and wrong? Have I condemned her to a life of loneliness." (272) She wants to fill the loneliness of her life with the presence of Sudha. She wants to bring Sudha to America. For Anju it was not only a question of Sudha, but the question of her own native sensibility. It shows that in spite of the shift of location, Anju finds herself helpless to emancipate herself with the personal bonding with which she was to survive. In the life of Anju, in spite of growing isolation, the immigration becomes a process to redefine the mechanism of life. "I will bring Sudha and her daughter to America, why not. She can sew clothes for all the Indian ladies here and may be finally open that boutique she dreamed of." (276) After immigration Anju becomes conscious of her own earnings and her own identity. She wants to earn own dollars to mark her own freedom of choices. She no longer appreciates the crazy and affectionate ways of Americans and prefers to do all her works herself. She sustains herself respect and the dignity of work. She condemns Americanized ridiculous ways. "They'd probably laugh their heads off if I told them how, growing up in India, I'd have given anything to be allowed to work at our bookstore, to not to ask someone for things." (287) The contradiction is also evident in the responses of Sunil. With his Candid nature, he seeks merger in American life but he fails to get rid of his Indian male chauvinism. Like most of the immigrant women, Anju seems to be doubly marginalized. She feels the crisis of money but Sunil does not permit her the liberty of take a job at her own accord. When Anju realizes the crisis of money and expresses her desire for job. With a sense of indignation Sunil admits, "His quite capable of feeling his own wife." (288) In this respect Anju's consciousness divides



between her memories of her native inheritance and the demands of the dynamic and progressive society of America. The contradiction in the vision of Sunil and Anju adversely affects their personal relationship.

In the company of Sunil in America, Anju finds herself no better than migratory birds. It is the distinction of Anju's consciousness that she lives in memories but is not anxious to go back to india. Like Tara of Bharati Mukherjee's Tiger's Daughter, Anju is not confident of going back to home land. Like Surjee Kalsey's protagonist, Anju also seems to realize some force that checks her return from the alien land to go home land. To quote:

The migratory birds
are here with this season thinking,
We will Fly V
back to our home for sure
Some of us are drawn with the chain
Some lag
in the swamp
No sun, No Earth
Where to look at, what to look for. (MigratoiyBirds : 40)

Anju loses her belongingness in her society, family and personal relationship. She tries to redefine her identity in professional life. In contrast of Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni promotes spaces to immigrant women characters to make their own choices to avoid dismay or depression. However, both Anju and Sudha express their consensus on the 'issue that the hybridity of America is a blessings to avoid the rigidity of conventions.

Chitra Banerjee tries to establish that most immigrants redefine their position under the shadows of gloom and loss because they fails to get rid of the consciousness that the fascination of the wealth is the only guiding force to make them settle in America.



. Chita Banerjee Divakaruni deals with the problem of immigrants with a greater touch of emotional bonding. In spite of the consolation of Sudha, old man desperately mentions, “I’ll never get back home, I know it. I’m going to die here.” (319) The urge to go back to home is not only old’s man craving but also a safe escape for Sudha. She plans to relocate herself in India and seeks new spaces with a new vision of life beyond the painful memories of the past. Trideep and his old father represent two types of reactions of immigrants to Americans.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni asserts that the assimilation is not a mechanical process. It requires lot of hard work to learn American habits, American ways and American expressions. Chitra Banerjee tries to establish that most of the immigrants survive in a state of perpetual loss, confusion and uncertainty. The nostalgia of home and the realization of “otherness” constitute the psyche of inferiority. In the realization of this “lack of qualities”, turning back to homeland seems to be the only remedy. In multicultural perspective the concept of “otherness” born out of racism is an inevitable phenomenon. Multiculturalism accepts diversities in cultural relations. This “otherness” is set against boundaries or centrality.

Conclusion: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, through her rich narratives, offers a nuanced exploration of the old and new dimensions of immigration perspectives. In her works, she delves into the profound complexities of migration, capturing the essence of both historical and contemporary immigrant experiences.

In the end. Divakaruni's exploration of immigration perspectives transcends time and borders, inviting readers to contemplate the universal truths embedded within the immigrant experience. By weaving together the old and new dimensions of migration, she enriches our understanding of the human condition and reminds us of the enduring power of resilience, adaptation, and hope in the face of adversity.



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