

Migration and Psychological Experience of ‘Resettlement’ in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*

By

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After moving to Sunnyvale, California, in 1989 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was interested in issues involving women. She even worked with Afghani women refugees and women from dysfunctional families, as well as in shelters for battered women. In 1991 she became founder–member and president of MAITRI, an organization in the San Francisco area to help the South Asian women in abusive situations. In her essay “My Work with MAITRI” she says, “My work with Maitri has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. I have heard of acts of cruelty beyond imagining. The lives of many of the women I have met through this organization have touched me deeply.”

Chitra Banerjee’s first novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), is distinct in that it blends prose and poetry, successfully employing magic realist techniques. Its heroine, Tilo (short for Tilottama), is the “mistress of spices.” She helps Lalita, an immigrant woman from India who is not happy in her married life. Even her life is similar with many married Indian women in America.

Ahuja’s wife, Lalita’s is a story of dispossession. She does not want to get married. It was only before three days to the wedding that she has seen her husband. He comes from America. He is totally different from the photo shown to her. Surprisingly, Lalita’s parents instead of objecting, show only their interest in pushing their daughter into a hurried marriage with Ahuja. She does not like him but she could not explain her desires to her parents. She leaves the settled and comfortable life at her father’s house to get married to a violent man, an alcoholic who abuses her: “the worst are the kisses after it is over, kisses that leave their wetness on her mouth, and his slaked repentant voice in her ear, lingering” (101). It continues in America too.

The institution of marriage is an important central part of the society. Marriage, supposed to be the holy union of two souls and bodies is the foundation of family. Sociologists define marriage as a cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring: “No doubt marriage can afford certain material and sexual conveniences: it frees the individual from loneliness, it establishes him securely in space and time by giving him a home and children; it is a definitive fulfilment of his existence” (De Beauvoir 421). Amongst Hindus, the wife is known as ‘Ardhangini’ or ‘Sahadharmini’ – terms which emphasis

her equality and oneness with the husband; in marriage companionship and mutuality are stressed. But unfortunately Lalita's expectations are shattered on the day of marriage itself. The detachment began in India is continued for ever.

Lalita is an attractive but downtrodden creature, found her arranged marriage to a much older, traditional and dominating Indian husband living in America is not a successful. She turns to Tilo when she is disappointed with her male counterpart. Veena Selvam in "Mistress and Sisters: Creating a Female Universe" in *The Commonwealth Review* remarks, "When once she [Tilo] lands in America in her spice store, she is able to empathise with her women customers better than with her male customers" (15).

Unhappy in her domestic life, Lalita wants to start tailoring again in America. She likes to continue to have her bank balance and freedom in life which she has enjoyed in her parents' house in India and curses her husband's domination. He is, "the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence he represents it in the view of society" (De Beauvoir 418). She loves to do needle work but she is not allowed to do so by her husband. Instead he expects her to obey in bed, whenever he is in need: "In bed especially I could not forget those nights in India. Even when he tried to be gentle I was stiff and not willing. Then he would lose patience and shout" (103). But she could not neglect the voice from her inside heart, which lays out the condition that outlines womanly duties for her. She is a human-being sandwiched between the cynical indifference of her husband and viciousness of his family. Her privacy, her desires, dreams and future are snatched away ruthlessly from her and her life is painted with black, "What do I have to live for? Once, more than anything in the world I wanted a baby. But is this any kind of home to bring a new life into?" (103). Lalita is like a caged bird, who fluttered to soar into the sky and live a free life but is incarcerated within the four walls of a house.

Family is an integral part of any society in the world. It is the family members who support each other during times of distress and disappointment. Even in a new land, an individual can have a blissful life if the family is with him. Lalita in *The Mistress of Spices* longs for a child and tries to form an emotional bond with her husband. As an immigrant woman she does not have any body to share her feelings, so she seeks Tilo's help when she goes to her spice shop.

In the case of Ahuja, his relationship with his wife Lalita is power-oriented. Instead of being based on love between two equal beings, one which suits the purposes of just one of the two: "Recently, the rules. No going out. No talking on the phone. Every penny I spend to be accounted for. He should read my letters before he mails them" (103). Thus she is subjected to an absolute enclosure including the interdiction to go to work, and to Ahuja's fits of jealousy when his obsessive phone calls are occasionally non-responded, which results in physical and sexual violence: "And the calls. All day. Sometimes every twenty minutes. To check on what I'm doing. To make sure I'm there. I pick up the phone and say hello and there is his breathing on the end of

the line” (103). Lalita scorns the word love and refuses to believe that such a thing can ever exist between man and woman. She starts hating the man–woman relationship which is based not on love but on attraction and need: “the wife is ashamed to find herself given to someone who is exercising a right over her” (De Beauvoir 432).

Feminism paves way for the concept of womanhood. The traditional role of the woman in the patriarchal society is always understood in connection with the male. She has no identity of her own but is venerated as a mother in relation to the father, as a sister in relation to her brother, as a wife in relation to her husband and as a daughter in relation to her father.

Lalita’s tragic condition worsens with the continuous beating. She is subjected to humiliation and sexual torture by her husband: “I need to get home. He must have called one dozen times. When he comes home tonight–” (104). Whenever Lalita says no to physical union, Ahuja can be patient only for a couple of days. When she refuses the third time he becomes violent. Her attempts to claw and bite receive a slap on the head: “Not hard, but the shock of it makes her go limp so he can do what he wants” (101). He shows no trace of compassion for her. Insulting and beating her becomes a matter of daily routine: “fear rises from her, shimmering, like heat from a cracked summer pavement. Fear and hate and disappointment” (104). She consults Tilo regarding her problem and understands that, “No man, husband or not, has the right to beat you [me], to force you [me] . . . I tell myself, I deserve dignity, I deserve happiness” (105-272).

Tilo helps Mrs. Ahuja become Lalita by overthrowing the tyrannical structures that have weighed her down. When she says that their life on the island of spices was no different from that of the village girls, the implication is that women for generations have learnt to bond with one another while learning household chores. They learn the lesson of bonding with other women by doing ordinary everyday chores like sweeping and stitching. Female bonding, therefore, has always been indirect and Tilo learns in the same indirect way as women all over the world.

The success of any interpersonal relationship depends on the autonomy and strength of each participant. Chitra Banerjee has portrayed the inner turmoil of a woman, fighting within herself, between her own knowledge and the thrust on her by the surroundings. Lalita realises that the home and parents are not the refuge but they are their own refuge. Although the family is the chief matrix and the woman’s life revolves around it, yet many of the women in Chitra Banerjee seem to be able to reconcile to it. She reveals her ability to create subtle images of women’s anguish when trapped in terrible relationships and when forced to live within rigid codes. The sensitivity, the strength and even the beautifully shattering imagery with which she is able to portray the sorrows and the frustrations of the women have always been apparent in her novels.

After leaving the house of her husband Lalita is afraid of her future and becomes frustrated. The Indian women in the organisation understand her condition and “they can help me [her] set up a small tailoring business” (272).

Lalita’s indecision whether to call for help as a battered wife leaves her feeling guilty, “One minute I would think Why not. Next minute I would think Chee chee, what sharam to tell strangers your husband is beating you” (269). She adjusts and accommodates unlike the modern women who find themselves and are forced into the background by the claims of culture.

In the end, Tilo got the letter from Lalita through the mail. Lalita writes that she has an organization’s help to come out of her house. She also explains the traditional expectations of Indian women in their native culture as a daughter and a wife. If Lalita continues to play her role as a daughter and a wife, she has to give up her wishes. So she decides to manage her life to suit her heart and pursue happiness in her own sweet way.

Freedom and richness in the West are often bought, particularly by the immigrant, at the expense of the love and support provided by the extended family or the community. America provides the advantage of anonymity but it also adds the burden of responsibility and loneliness. Thus it approves Homi Bhabha’s words in his *The Location of Culture*: “. . . his existentialist evocation of the ‘I’ restores the presence of the marginalized . . . illuminates the madness of racism, the pleasure of pain, the agonistic fantasy of political power” (58). The fear of being unloved and becoming a destitute in a foreign land is pictured in the novel. It is their helplessness that forces them to stick to the role of a wife. With that the bleakness of their future, the fear of being alone is added to. Lalita’s view is: “I thought of running away, but where could I go? I knew what happened to girls that left home. They ended up on the streets, or as kept women for men far worse than him. At least with him I had honour – her lips twist a little at the world- because I was a wife” (102).

Lalita caught in the trap of an arranged marriage with a balding, ageing man, restlessly seeking alternatives of her suffering and discovering, much to her horror and disappointment, that the voices of tradition and social expectation are not different for Indians in America. Though the story certainly makes it clear that she has been wounded emotionally and spiritually in order to come to terms with her new life in America.

Chitra Banerjee’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* portrays independent, introspective and self-determined woman, Lalita who has accepted her life as immigrant and observe the host country with sensitivity and objectivity. The conflict between the earlier generation and the subsequent generation will persist as it involves a complex discourse on cultural representation, nation, ethnicity and home. However, the women with the passage of time learn to become independent and a majority of them refashion themselves by dismantling the stereotypical portrayal of women. This can be considered

as a positive sign in the endeavour of those women who are constantly on the lookout for some change and transformation.

The message which the writer conveys is that a woman's emancipation lies neither in suffering quietly like a fatalist nor in repudiating all claims of the family and society like a rebel. She must draw upon her inner strength, which her education and knowledge have given her and bring about reconciliation between tradition and modernity without losing her own identity. Most of the times the protagonists revolt against the exploitations of men and sometimes they adjust with men. They know that whatever the attitude of the society be, the 'new woman' has become conscious of her destination, viz. to liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs forced on her by male dominance.

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