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Mistress of Spices: A Saga of Immigrants' Pain and Suffering

Abstract:

One of the most perpetrated myths about America is its “American Dream”. A good number of people around the world look at it as the land of opportunities. America is the ‘Promised Land’ for those who strive hard to get success. It promises of freedom, individuality, space, success, dignified life, better standard of living. There are many writers and critics, media and other instruments to spread the myth of ‘melting pot’ but refuse to focuss on the cost it takes from immigrants. The research paper enables readers to rethink about the promises of ‘promised land’. It proves that immigrants undergo lot of suffering and pain in their endeavour to chase the “American Dream”. The *Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni attempts to record this suffering and pain of the immigrants. In immigrants suffer on account of different reasons. They suffer the pain of being away from their native land. They suffer humiliation due to undignified / low profile jobs, cultural differences, identity conflict, dilemma of assimilation, hostile attitude of foreign society, language barriers etc. they reasons for their pain and agony are many more to discuss in detail. The research paper endeavours to capture the pain and predicaments of Indian immigrants in America as brought out in Divakaruni’s seminal novel- *The Mistress of Spices*.

Keywords: American Dream, Promised Land, Melting Pot, identity crisis, assimilation etc.

Immigration has always been thought of as a ray of hope for a better living in foreign land. Migration to America has always been considered as a guaranteed path to ‘success’. ‘American Dream’ is a myth popularised and promoted by the mass media. Immigrants go to America to achieve this dream. The term ‘American Dream’ was coined by James Truslow Adams in his book ‘The Epic of America’ (1931). He writes,

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, also too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it.

The concept of “the American Dream” lures people to migrate to the States. It is an inspiration for many people to test their destiny for a better living. It is a unique Dream and a myth that has attracted settlers’ and immigrants’ from different corners of the world. But not every immigrant has a success story in America. There are many who struggle to make it big. This failure brings them frustration and pain. The dream as conceived by the founders was much better in sense of equal opportunities for all irrespective of one’s caste, creed, community, religion, language etc. Adams (1931) describes the dream:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

Campbell and Kean, in their book *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*, write what the ‘new continent’ has always meant for the immigrants:

Their (immigrants’) arrival in the new continent meant a turning point for those individuals in search for a new beginning: “This ‘new’ continent seemed to offer the last great hope for ‘mankind’ to begin again and put right all the wrongs of the Old World (27).

With globalization, the concept of ‘blurring borders’ has become very popular. But, we cannot deny the significance of borders and our old world culture in our lives. The old world culture and identity is something that the immigrants always live with. It could be in the form of past memories and cultural relics like food, spices, clothes, religious practices etc. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an immigrant herself, depicts both - the dreams as well as the struggles of immigrants in America. Divakaruni appreciates the hope for freedom, individuality and

better life that America evokes in the minds of the immigrants. But at the same time, she very authentically records the sufferings of the immigrants, especially those from the Indian sub-continent. She focusses on their pathetic lives in their chosen land.

Since ages, immigrants are arriving on the American shores in the hope of better living. They are willing to go through hardship and sufferings. But once they land they face many barriers in their assimilation in the American Culture. They suffer pain and agony being in America. The reasons vary for their sufferings. One of the major causes of the trauma the immigrants undergo is the 'cultural baggage' they carry with them. The process of acclimatization and assimilation is a challenging one. Initially they have to go through the pain of 'unconditioning' themselves from 'cultural baggage' of their native land and try to 'condition' themselves in the ways and culture of the new land. According to Avtar Brah the old world, "...cannot be expunged so easily, for we carry traces in our psyche." (5). Immigrants miss so much of their 'lost old world' in the foreign land. It is difficult for them to forget their past. In this context Tölölyan writes : " ...the defining characteristics of diasporas are, first, a culture and collective identity that preserves elements of the homeland's language, or religious, social, and cultural practice, either intact or as time passes, in mixed, bicultural forms" (649). As a result of it the American immigrants share a sense of isolation that, in some ways, defines their life experiences.

The novel – *The Mistress of Spices* is a saga of immigrants' painful experiences in America. Most of them face many problems. For instance, Tilo, the main protagonist who is sent by the First Mother to America to heal only Indian immigrants' pain has to disguise her youth and beauty under the skin of an old, wrinkled lady. Tilo, short for Tilottama, is an archetype of immigrants' dream. On the Spice Island she learnt the art of healing people with the magical power of the spices. Tilo uses the power of spices to heal the pain of the people. She suggests and prescribes different spices for different people who come to her "SPICE BAZAAR". Though she cures the immigrants' pain, yet she is unable to free herself from the rigid customs of the "Spice Land" where she gets training of the spices'. The healer herself goes through the pain of being imprisoned within the Store. She is prohibited from seeing herself in the mirror. The mirror, symbolic of one's own identity, the mistress was denied the right to realise her own identity in the land of freedom and individuality. She was not allowed to fall in love with anyone. "...Mistress must leave her own passion behind" (31).

Mrs. Ahuja, a customer of the SPICE BAZAR, is a victim of domestic violence. She is afflicted with physical and psychological scars. Tilo has a power to see her customers' predicaments and victimization in America. Tilo tries to solve their problems by prescribing different spices. Initially Mrs. Ahuja considers herself only as a wife, but "Ahuja's wife has of course a name. Lalita... I would like to call her by it, but how can I while she thinks of herself only as a wife" (14). Lalita becomes a victim of 'double marginalisation'. Her husband, Mr. Ahuja - a watchman at the docks - exploits her physically, sexually and psychologically. Lalita, being alone at home experiences the pain of loneliness: "... all day at home is so lonely, the silence like quick- sand sucking at her wrists and ankles. Tears she cannot stop, disobedient tears..." (15). She is very good at stitching, but she is not allowed to work. Her husband thinks it would be unmanly on his part to allow her to work: "He refuses that his woman should work..*Aren't I man enough, man enough, man enough*"(15). He beats her regularly. Mrs. Ahuja thinks a child would resolve her plight: "A baby. Surly a baby would make everything right, even the heaving, grunting, never-ending nights. A baby to negate it all" (15). Her longing for the child is deeper than the longing for wealth or lover. The mistress gives her the spices meant to heal her pain. But Lalita's pain and agony continues till she decides to leave her husband.

She was cheated into marrying Mr. Ahuja. Back in India, she was shown a photo of a young Ahuja. He came to india only three days before the marriage. It was then that she saw a pot-bellied and bald Ahuja. By that time it was too late to call off the marriage. She thought of the consequences her parents and sisters would have to face if the marriage was called off. She had no other option but to follow him silently to America: "Silence and tears, silence and tears, all the way to America."(102)

In America, he tortures her to no end: abusing her mind and body and even accusing her of having an extra-marital affair. Mrs. Ahuja lives with the identity of 'Ahuja's wife'. She has no individual identity. Her identity is in relation to a man. Mrs. Ahuja remains submissive as the wife, suppressing her own individual self. She "thinks of herself only as a wife" (14). Mrs. Ahuja suffers the trauma of having to live the life of forced identity - as a wife to an exploitative husband. Though she wishes to assert her liberal self but the tyrant husband prohibits her from doing so. This exploitative situation agonizes her. She becomes a victim of alienation, nostalgia, identity conflict. She does not know how to balance between two conflicting worlds. The trauma leads her to think of committing suicide. She thinks life

would be more difficult if she leaves her husband. She informs Tilo, “I thought of running away, but where could I go? I knew what happens 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....- because I was a wife.” (102). The inability to break the patriarchal codes pushes her into greater suffering. The burden of ‘cultural baggage’ suffocates her. She recalls and tells the Mistress that before her marriage she used to wonder as to how women can commit suicide as it must be too painful to bear. But, now after the marriage, she has come to realise why those women prefer death to life. As she says, “*Mataji*, I used to be afraid of death. I’d hear of women who killed themselves and think how could they. Now I know.” (103)

Mr. Ahuja, though a tyrant and wicked husband is himself a victim of humiliation and frustration. He experiences humiliation due to low profile job. He has to face the hostility of Americans. He vents his frustration at his wife. The American Dream he would have seen back in India and what he is experiencing are vastly different. The difference between dream and reality brings him frustration and he suffers trauma of being all alone in the hostile society.

Immigrants’ trials and tribulation become severe when they become victims of the racial conflict in their adopted land. Divakaruni herself expresses the disillusionment of the Indian immigrants in her poem “Indian Movie, New Jersey”:

We do not speak of motel raids,
canceled permits, stones thrown through glass windows,
daughters and sons raped by Dotbusters. [...]
Here while the film-songs still echo
in the corridors and restrooms, we can trust
in movie truths: sacrifice, success, love and luck,
the America that was supposed to be.

America though it apparently looks like a ‘melting pot’ demands a big cost and a lot of sacrifices on the part of the immigrants to get assimilated into it. If they fail to adopt the new land and carry their own lost world identities they become disillusioned. Divakaruni in her aforesaid poem takes up the issue of racial attack against non-natives and shows disillusionment of the immigrants in face of such blatant racial violence. The poem was composed against the background of the outburst of violence in New Jersey in 1987, when a

group that named itself "Dotbusters" violated South Asian women who were wearing the traditional decorative *bindi*.

Immigrants become victims of racial attacks and hostility in America. The trauma of being hated also causes them pain and agony. Jagjit Singh, a sikh child suffers racial discrimination at school and outside. He does not wish to attend the school. The teacher put him on the last row in the class. The first English word he has learnt is 'Idiot'. 'Asshole' is his second English word. The native students make fun of his green turban. "In the playground they try to pull it off his head...They dangle the cloth from their fingertips and laugh at his long, uncut hair. And push him down" (38). When he comes home in his dirty school clothes with buttons gone and a big tear on his shirt, he has to suffer the shouting of his mother. Buying a new set of clothes is a strain on the limited resources they have. At night he is unable to sleep properly. When he tries to close his eyes, 'the jeering voices, the spitting mouths, the hands'(39) come to haunt him. "...he lies with his eyes open, staring until the stars begin to flicker like fireflies in his grandmother's *kheti* outside Jullunder. She is singing as she gathers for dinner bunches of saag green as his turban. Punjabi words that sound like rain " (39). That is what gives him solace. He wants to leave his school. They bully him: "Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole" (39). Jagjit experiences the pain of being alienated. He doesn't have friends. He keeps to himself. The Mistress prescribes Cinnamon for him. According to her, Cinnamon is 'friend-maker' and 'destroyer of enemies'. This leaves a psychological trauma to him. He gradually keeps himself aloof from the external environment. However later on, he tries to cope up with the racial humiliation by adopting the native culture and fashion of young kids. Transition from one culture to the native culture is very hard for immigrants or descendants of immigrants with existing identity issues.

Daksha - a nurse in a hospital feels the pain of being torn between two different and conflicting worlds. She works in the AIDS ward of a hospital where she has to take care of 'young men grown light as children in their eroding bones' (80). It is a torture for her to see 'their fragile bruised skin, their enormous waiting eyes' (80). She finds herself a prisoner of patriarchal codes once she comes home from her work. Her mother-in-law tortures her by demanding constant attention. She expects Daksha to do all the household-chores. The mother-in-law demands freshly cooked food as she believes, "old food from the fridge is good only for servants or dogs..." (80). Every night, after coming home from the hospital, she

has to cook for the family and serve it at the dinning table: “Boiling frying seasoning ladling serving wiping up while everyone sits saying ‘Good,’ saying, ‘Yes, more’...” (80). Her husband is also not sympathetic to her. She finds it difficult to bring herself to say that she can’t do all the work. Tilo gives Daksha the seed of black pepper to be boiled whole and drunk to loosen her throat say ‘No’. Characters like Daksha are forced to be in their old world identities even in ‘liberal’ America. The outside world of freedom, space and individuality demands from them to shed off their old oppressive identities and seek a new identity in the free land of promises. Immigrants like Daksha find it difficult to make the choice. They find themselves always in the trapped situation.

To conclude, through *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni speaks as the spokesperson immigrants who suffer pain and agony in America. America, the dreamland, the ‘melting pot’, lures immigrants for better possibilities but it does not always turn out to be so.

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