



Women in Exile: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, and Anita Rau Badami

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Abstract

The paper entitled “Women in Exile: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, and Anita Rau Badami” discusses how three prominent woman writers of the Diaspora deal with problems of the transnational women.

Keywords: Womanist, Diaspora, Transnational, Immigrants, Expatriate, Hegemonic discourse, Selfhood, Maximalist, Orientalized.

During the post-colonial period, literature has crossed the boundaries of nation, language, and culture. An important feature of the period is the emergence of woman writers. Significant space has been created for women to discuss their peculiar problems and issues. The social, cultural, and literary definitions accumulated over the past by the patriarchal tradition were redefined from alternate and, especially, from feminist or womanist points of view. With more and more women taking part in the public life and the steady increase in the number of independent women, there is a significant rise in women’s writings across the globe. The paper entitled “Women in Exile: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, and Anita Rau Badami” discusses how three prominent woman writers of the Diaspora deal with problems of the transnational women.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a popular award winning novelist and poet. Though she writes on a wide variety of themes, she directs much focus on the immigrant experience of the South Asian women in the U.S. She delineates the experiences and struggles involved in women trying to find their own identities. She is centrally concerned with giving shape to South Asian women’s lives the United States. Living in San Francisco, Divakaruni works as a writer to express a more complexly contoured politics of the oppressed and also, within her South Asian community, to improve the living- conditions of the women. Bharati Mukherjee deals with how migration and expatriation complicate the lives of Indian- American women in the USA. She also breaks with the conventional presentation of the stereotypical archetypes, and her characters are in contrast with the underbelly immigrants who exist in the liminal waiting room between East and West. Through inter-textual elements Mukherjee examines the tension immigrants feel in the liminal space between cultures as well as they agency this “betweenness” affords them. Anita Rau Badami is one of the most prominent writers of the Indian Diaspora in the U. S. A. Her novels deal with the problems of the immigrants, especially the woman immigrants. Being herself an expatriate woman, her discussion of the issues of immigrants gains authenticity. She is also a humanist. Infact, her feminism is influenced by humanism. Badami, the humanist, offers a solution to women’s freedom. Badami in her novels highlights the woman’s status in the traditional Indian family. She voices for the equality of women and does not rule out the role of men. Thus, she is more a humanist than a feminist. Her novels have definitely created a space for the discussion of the issues related to the difficulties of women. She contributes to the development of women’s status as her novels have only female protagonists and deal with their peculiar problems.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* is about magic, wielded by a woman masquerading as an old and hunchbacked creature, but in reality, vibrant, eager for life, hungry with desires. Tilo, the mistress of spices, has many guises and names that reveal her multiple identities. Chameleon-like, she keeps changing throughout the novel, making clear how complex the problem of identity crisis is that Indians try to cope in a foreign land. The

Mistress of Spices deals with the inner conflict raging within a woman who has to decide whether she has to live for the welfare of others or to live for herself.

Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni drew her inspiration from the Indian epics -- The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. She writes that as a child her grandfather would tell her stories from the epics. She was even impressed with the great women of the epics like Sita, Draupadi, Queen Kunti Devi and Shabari. All these women devoted their lives to the wish of the men. Interestingly, unlike the male heroes, the main relationships these women had were the opposite sex i.e. with their husbands, sons, lovers or opponents. They never had any important women friends. "The aloneness of the epic heroines seemed strange to me even as a child, I could see this was not how women around me lived", writes Divakaruni (108). Perhaps in rebellion against such thinking, "I find myself focusing my writing on friendships with women, and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers" (110). She says, "Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships, I want people to relate my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to (be) prejudiced when they meet them in real life" (26-27).

Divakaruni's interest in women began after she left India, at which point she came to re-evaluate the treatment of women there. Flashback to the day after Divakaruni came to the U.S. from Calcutta in 1976, at the age of 19. She was walking down the streets of Chicago with some relatives, wearing a saree, when some teenagers called them 'nigger' and threw slush at them. "That was such a shock to me; I realized that people didn't know who we were" (25). And although she kept quiet about the incident, it stayed and played in her mind, spurring her to write. "I never talked anyone about it: I felt ashamed. Writing was a way to go beyond the silence" (26). The Indian experience in America and the conflict between the traditions of her homeland and the culture of her adopted country is the focus of much of Divakaruni's writings and it has made her an emerging literary celebrity. She writes

I didn't really see my culture until I came to America and discovered what it meant to be woman of colour in the U.S. This gave me the impetus to write, to explore new identities. Badly and tentatively I began writing early poems, you think I'm being modest but I'm not. I destroyed those sentimental and bad poems recently so no archivist could find them. (53)

She further states

Coming to America for me was an amazing experience that began to change me from the minute I sat in the airplane, but the experience took years to process I was full of fear, excitement, opportunity I have been waiting for now for almost 20 years but I still make discoveries. (22) .

In *The Mistress of Spices*, the character Tilo provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants experience. She writes to unite people and she does this by destroying myths and stereotypes. As she breaks down these barriers, she dissolves boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages and even different worlds. *The Mistress of Spices* is unique in that it is written with a blend of prose and poetry. The book has a very mystical quality to it, and, as Chitra Divakaruni puts forth in an interview: 'I wrote in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable' (61). The novel follows Tilo, a magical woman who runs a grocery store and uses spices to help the customers overcome difficulties. In the process, she develops dilemmas of her own when she falls in love with a non-Indian. This brings out the true woman inside, who then has two minds. This creates conflicts, as she has to choose whether to serve her people or to follow the path leading to her own happiness. Tilo has to decide which parts of her heritage she will keep and which parts she will choose to abandon.

Divakaruni adopts a more complex strategy for portraying diasporic identity. She makes use of elements of the fable in order to explore the various kinds of problems encountered by immigrants who come to the promised land of "silver pavements and golden roofs." This first person narrative is told from the perspective of Tilottama who has trained to extract the essence of the spices and make them work to alleviate pain, solve problems and help people live better lives. Banerjee observes, "the mistress- the deliberate gendering of the world to undercut the power associated with mastery is to be noted- has supernatural powers. She can presage disasters and look into the hearts of people" (22). Her trainer, the Old One, had told her signifying that Tilottama would never be the submissive, complaint mistress that she was expected to be. "You were the only one in whose hands the spices sang back" (32). But Tilottama, or Tilo as she calls herself, is not infallible; sometimes the problems of the diaspora are too convoluted for her to deal with. She cannot protect Mohan from the racist attack or his store which leaves him crippled, emotionally and physically. Tilo recreates a little India which boasts of all the spices that ever were -- even the lost ones. "I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other place in the world quite like this", (3) she says of her store. It attracts a large group of people for whom the place is reminiscent of home, a little oasis in their diasporic lives fraught with problems. The mistress feels that the Indians come to the store in quest of happiness: "All those voices, Hindi, Oriya, Assamese, Urdu, Tamil, English, layered one on the other like notes from a

tempura, all those voices asking for more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where”(78).

But even within the structure of the fable Divakaruni has underscored the opaque nature of national borders. The mistress is allowed by the powers that be to work magic only for the good of her own people. Remember why you are going, the Old One said, “To help your own kind and them only. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need”(68). National boundaries become aggressive, all important in the diaspora, as a way of defining identity that marks the contours of one’s experience, a platform for resisting co-optation by the dominant/ hegemonic discourse. The store, with its sacred and secret shelves functions as a geographical/ textual space that is the repository of a monolithic national identity. The store represents a space for self indulgence “dangerous for a brown people who came from elsewhere to whom real Americans might say why” (5)? Like the fable, the spices speak in this novel: “I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the Devas and Asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lies in between” (13).

For first- generation south Asians; issues of belonging become increasingly complicated the longest they stay in North America, and even more profoundly complex as they bring up children here, children who are socialized in the North American context- its schools, its movie theaters, its bars, its malls, its streets. Boundaries between ethnicities, class, gender and religion dissolve and re-emerge, as second generation South Asians move from home to school and college, to workplace and to peer groups. In the fissures of these topographics of consciousness arise the ingredients of contest identities and contested forms of belonging (or not belonging) in North America. (127)

Tilo struggles with her own passions as she builds emotional relationship with a native American man. She transforms herself into a woman, feeling guilty about her “self indulgence” but decides to brave the retribution that she would have to face. Banerjee says that “Tilo’s re-formulation about her body, her desire to have a relationship with Raven, go against the laws of the Order of Mistresses”(26). When she chooses mortal love, the spices themselves turn against her and she is threatened with the ultimate punishment; to return to Shampati’s fire from which she emerged, but this time be burnt to a crisp veritable phoenix flambee. When she unites with Raven, she seeks a new name for herself-Maya. The narrator changes her name many times, from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottamma and finally to Maya, the most appropriate name, since it means spell or enchantment. She has to change her identities many times in order to arrive at a final definition of selfhood. The Mistress of Spices abounds in imagery that best describes the condition of the immigrants in the U.S. The land seems to offer them hope in the beginning, but soon they realize that they have been deluded. The condition of the women immigrants is even worse. They are unable to accustom themselves to the alien environment of the new land. Besides, they feel psychological and cultural alienations. Gender differences become all the more apparent in the Diaspora. Their hopes are turned into delusions and their expectations into disappointments. Uprooted from the native soil and unable to strike roots in the alien soil, their lives are perpetual struggle for belonging and identity.

This inner conflict has been well narrated in this novel with some fantasy and mysticism. Tilo struggles with her own passions as she builds emotional relationship with a Native American man. She transforms herself into a woman, feeling guilty about her “self indulgence” but decides to brave the retribution that she would have to face. The narrator changes her name many times, from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottamma and finally to Maya, the most appropriate name, since it means spell or enchantment.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the story of a widowed Punjabi peasant woman rediscovering herself in the U.S.A., was published in 1989. The New York Times Book Review called *Jasmine* "One of the most suggestive novels we have about what it is to become American." At the year's end, it named the book one of the best of 1989. The San Francisco Chronicle and The New York Times praised the author's poetic writing style. The Library Journal said, "The novel has delicious humor and sexiness that make it a treat to read."

Jasmine, the title character and narrator of the novel, is a young woman whose life takes her from India to the United States, where she lives out many different destinies. *Jasmine* was born by 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnpur. She narrates her story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, *Jasmine* also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Her long journeys encompass five different settings, two murders, one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character's identity, along with her name, changes and changes again: from Jyoti to *Jasmine* to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane.

The major theme of rebirth plays out literally and figuratively in *Jasmine*. In literal language, every word is truthful, whereas figurative language is used for a certain effect. Figurative language might be exaggerated, or embellished, or used to help access otherwise difficult-to-grasp concepts. The opening line, "Lifetimes ago," hints at all the

transformations the title character has undergone. Mukherjee consistently highlights this theme, making authorial connections between the fictional action and its significance as a subject under investigation. The narrator says, "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself." And, "I picked [Sam] up and held him. Truly I had been reborn." Jasmine undergoes life transformations, or metaphorical rebirths. Dr. Mary Webb shares with Jasmine her belief in literal rebirth, or reincarnation. Mary claims to have been a black Australian aborigine in a past life. When channeling this past life, she speaks tribal languages.

Jasmine complicates and hybridizes the process of becoming American using inter-textual elements. References to canonical texts often represent obstacles in Jasmine's struggle to separate herself from her postcolonial Indian identity. Most of these stereotypical archetypes contrast with the underbelly immigrants who exist in the liminal waiting room between East and West. Through inter-textual elements Mukherjee examines the tension immigrants feel in the liminal space between cultures as well as they agency this "betweenness" affords them. The English texts also represent Jasmine's struggle learning English and the ability to apply English texts she reads to her own experiences. Jasmine's speaking a new language and acquiring new names becomes a severing process from Orientalism, an act of rebirth in some ways that is just as violent in its complete erasure of the past as her committed murder of Half-Face. Jasmine adopts America's narrative and by doing so transform its meaning.

In order to move beyond the "normative narratives" of postcolonial India, Mukherjee rewrites English influence through Jasmine's marriage to Prakash, Jasmine equates her with Westernization, which eventually produces his desire to become American. Jasmine ends the "Jasmine" identity Prakash gives her through sati as soon as she arrives in America, counteracting his essentialist view of the West as "progress" and since "Jasmine" was born with this view she must die with the idealism. From this act on, Jasmine becomes her own Professor Higgins and defines the patriarchal implications of the original text. Mukherjee uses Pygmalion not in a deconstructive sense but as an expansion upon the original text. Jasmine takes what she finds useful from the Pygmalion archetype and symbolically burns the rest.

Jasmine similarly expands upon Jane Eyre through her Jane Ripplemeyer incarnation, which picks up where the original text ended. "Jane" is pregnant with the Rochester figure's baby. Someone they thought they were protecting disables both Rochester and Bud due to actions. Harlan is one of Bud's clients and Rochester believes that Bertha's seclusion is for her own good. However, Bud's paraplegic comes from his unwillingness to recognize the economic pressure on Baden's farmers causes them to lash out at moneylenders. Jasmine's pregnancy is product of artificial insemination, and it is implied that she does not love her "Rochester." When she lives with Bud Jasmine becomes increasingly aware of his willful ignorance of class or race distinction, and he keeps his ignorance in order to maintain the delusion that he is still "the pillar of Baden"(200). Like Jane Eyre, Jasmine serves as a moral beacon for the corrupt "Rochester".

After meeting Jasmine, Bud is transformed by his Orientalist interactions with Asia, which compels him to "make up for fifty years of 'selfishness'" (144). Du, the Vietnamese refugee who becomes their adopted son, fills the role of the ward Adele, and he is ignored as much by Bud as Adele is by Rochester. Furthermore, as Rochester ignores Adele in order to forget his past sins, Du stands as a continual reminder of the fallout from the Vietnam War as a victim of the resulting political instability. Bud adopts Du presumptively to make up for the "selfishness" of his past, but metaphorically this reads as an emblem of America's tendency to assuage political guilt with charitable contributions. Bud's concept of America never changes despite the evidence in his surroundings, and he continually regards Du with suspicion. Through her incarnation as the dynamic and individualistic "June", Jasmine eventually grows beyond the role of exoticized moral compass. As she explains at the end of the novel: "I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (240). Though presumable she chooses the "promise of America" by leaving with Taylor at the end of the novel, Jasmine is unsure of her fate.

Jasmine's gender categorizes her as more susceptible to psychological transformation under Mukherjee's ideology. Pregnancy is a trope of transformation for female Indian protagonists in several of Mukherjee's novels, especially *The Holder of the World*, are half Indian and half American, and the ties between these two countries features strongly. In *Jasmine*, the child is symbolically linked both with Jasmine's development and the development of the maximalist text. Jasmine tells her story through retrospect to give ample connection to the act of rebirth that she undergoes throughout the book. At the novel's end, Jasmine is in her last term of pregnancy but the baby's gender or any identifying marks have been kept hidden from the reader. This is not surprising since the novel's focus on rebirth naturally frustrates the idea of a linear birth / death process and of a static identity. KuldipKaurKuwahara observes, "the experience of reading the novel is that of holding connected and contradictory layers of consciousness simultaneously" (Kuwahara 2). It is difficult to pinpoint when each incarnation of Jasmine begins and ends, even with her insistence that "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams" (25). The reader never witnesses the birth of Jasmine's child just as they never witness her maintaining a stable identity. The narrative stays in the gestational stage because it is a fable about the development of a new America and not its final arrival. More significantly, because the narrative never enters a final conclusion or birth Jasmine is

never presented with the necessity to adopt a stable sense of identity. Jasmine's identity, much like Jasmine's child, seems to be forever in the fetal stages of development.

Jasmine's rebirth as Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jazzy/Jase/Jane represent stages in Jasmine's ever-changing self-identification process and the cultural influence she undertakes at each stage. When Jasmine visits a swami in an "ashram" after Prakash's death, he tells her that a person's highest mission is to create new life (97). She later realizes that the identity of Jasmine and the dream of Vijn and Wife are her versions of this "new life" (97). It is through this redefinition of "new life" that Jasmine gains enough courage to transform herself into a maximalist immigrant. The process of resignification in Jasmine's name changes does not stick because the group categorical identification's inner effects do not retain themselves in Jasmine's view of her identity. Jasmine's selves do not follow the concept of wholeness and often overlap; frustrating the power the signifier has over the signified. Reincarnation's heavy influence as a trope distinguishes Jasmine's narrative as maximalist since it does not follow the traditional American narrative's logical, linear story. Hindu texts, namely for their focus on reincarnation and pluralistic deities, are the clearest Indian cultural influence on these rebirths. Jasmine, like the Bengali interpretation of Kali, encompasses birth and destruction at the same time. Her journey also reads as a realization of Hindu theological beliefs about the soul. The text's tangled structure allows Jasmine the freedom to float between classic to powerful Indian goddess Kali. This structure also prescribes the breakdown of cultural barriers literature. Here Mukherjee provides not only a space for the Indian immigrant in the American canon, but also subtly makes the argument that Indian women do not adhere to their passive Orientalized stereotype. She uses the pitcher as a visual representation of performative femininity within Hindu culture, namely due to its connection to water gathering (women's work) and the force needed to break it. Mukherjee enables Jasmine's maximalism to be seen as feminist in ways that defy both historical conceptions of women by breaking the "pitcher" that divides American and Indian feminine roles represented in these characters. Through interwoven identities of fictional women that gain agency through their ability to transform themselves, Mukherjee sets a literary precedent for Jasmine and therefore asserts her place as an American feminist character.

Hindu interpretations of the soul provide a map for how the Hindu self-concept as a breakable pitcher gets translated into the American trope of the pioneer. As pioneers within American culture were seen to violently break with their past to explore new territories, the "self made man" trope of identity that encompasses the mythical pioneer experiences becomes Jasmine's new totem. This trope emerges as early as Jasmine's youth in Hasnapur where she views "seven Brides for Seven Brothers" and "Shane". Both films present an idealized depiction of the American west filled with rugged outlaws and lumberjacks stealing startlingly complicit women for their wives. Jasmine states that this version of America does not translate for her, but this early introduction of western mythology serves as a benchmark for her transformation.

In the era of globalization, the world has shrunk in to a mere village. On the one hand technology in telecommunication has increased the contacts between peoples of the world. Migration, trans-nationalism, and multiculturalism have become familiar terms in common parlances. But, at the same time, loneliness isolation and quest for identity have become the familiar themes of modern writings. Anita Rau Badami's Tamarind Mem attempts to explore this malady in her novel Tamarind Mem. Most expatriates try to escape from the alien life. Their longing for home in the birth land becomes an unfulfilled dream. The desire for a safe place to call home manifests itself in competition between life and death. The survival for a comfortable life ends in a happy life for half of the people and tragedy for the other half.

The identity of an individual is shaped by his/her self- perceptions of the world surrounding him/her based on the religion, race, class, economic and social status of family cultural and religious beliefs shared by the society in which the individual lives. Identity for a woman in particular questions a lot. A woman is always a preserver of culture. An expatriate woman is called as a "half and half". Because she is half-and-half in her, culture, country, the mere fact in parentage too. Badami portrays the feelings of the Diasporas by describing their heartfelt desires to come out from their mobility life. Not all the Diasporas have the freedom of choice in their migrations. In search of identity, the characters lose one identity and find out another one. Badami writes almost exclusively about the category of immigrants, of new Diasporas, for whom mobility is a central concern. She claims, "I don't think I could have written a novel if I had not left India... I find that the distance gives me perspective and passion. I was twenty-nine years in India and ten years here, so I have a foot in India and a couple of toes here."

In Badami's novels, the desire for a safe place to call home manifests itself in competition between life and death. These opposing forces need not act on the same time, even if they do act in tandem. In Badami's novel Tamarind Mem, Saroja and Kamini try to create a home where they can find their identity. In Saroja's life, her search of identity is motivated by her gender. Even from her childhood, she has her desire to do medicine. But it is forbidden by her parents and she is locked into marriage bond. Her marriage life is a silent war, for Saroja holds her "tamarind" tongue. A frustrated Saroja feels caught in the traditional role of an Indian wife and mother who must always be the epitome of an ideal woman - - cooking, keeping the house and raising children. Saroja uses her sour

tongue to show her revenge upon her disappointed life and protect her daughters from those traditional rules that have caught her and destroyed her romantic dreams. Saroja uses her sour tongue to break all the barriers, which prevent her to create her own room.

Saroja starts her journey in search of identity only after giving everything to her daughters. Whatever she missed in her life, she manages to offer to her daughters. When her younger daughter Roopa marries without permission from her mother, she never abandons her; 'My girls know how to pick their fruit' (148). Her elder daughter Kamini expresses her desire to do doctorate in Chemical Engineering in Calgary University in Canada, she protests to allow her because of her motherhood feelings of sending a girl abroad without any protection to her. She uses her sour tongue to melt Kamini's desire. "...I have been a modern-times mother and these girls have taken advantage of me" (150).

From her acceptance of her being a modern times mother, Badami pictures Saroja as a woman escaping from the traditional prison to the modern independent world. She individualizes her life from everything. First from her orthodox parents and then from her disappointed married life and now she unconsciously slowly escapes from the motherly duties. She wants to lead a life for her own, she does not want anyone to watch and order her to do and not to do. She cuts off the relation of being a good mother to her daughters. They are now just disgusting brats to her. Because women like Saroja never want to leave her identity as a modern independent woman. Saroja's travel by train as a modern day "sanyasi" shows Saroja's room of her own. She never wants to depress her future and waste her remaining energy. She uses it to fulfill her wishes of journey. Her search of identity completes in her pilgrimage around the country.

All the three woman writers have made significant efforts to create identities of their own independent of any established theory. They all had firsthand experience in the alien soil. Being women, they were able to translate the experience of women with authenticity. In their portrayal of women, they have avoided the stereotypes. They have also highlighted the resilient nature of women which is a remarkable that facilitate women adapt themselves to circumstances better than men. The conventional portraits transnational women as victims have been broken, and these writers have projected them as champions who successfully overcome adverse circumstances.

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