With the word ‘Globalization’ many a things have changed. One is not sure, weather the world has become small like a village or people of this global world have started shrinking. The changing time, in the sense of sociology and economy, has encouraged or forced people to start moving away from their roots. All the time when they move away from the roots, it may not be possible to have new branches around growing and converting into roots supporting the body of the tree as banyan tree. Literature, being the reflection of the society, has succeeded to bring out this dilemmatic diasporic sensibility of global citizen. There are innumerable writers writing about their own people and culture being on the foreign land. Chitra Divakaruni is one of them. The research paper focuses on the novel The Mistress of Spices by Chitra Divakaruni with special reference to the replica of diaspora as well as feminist sensibility in that.

Key words: Diaspora, Feminist Sensibility

The Mistress of Spices is a novel which has adopted a more complex strategy for portraying diasporic identity. Not only that but sometimes it is more of feminist diasporic sensibility. Thus the threads of feminism and diaspora are interwoven in the story. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American writer who emerged on the world literary scene during 1990 and established herself as a prolific and extremely discerning writer. She has co-founded Maitri an organization that works with South Asian women dealing with situation and condition of domestic violence. She has also worked with Afghani Women refugees and women from dysfunctional families, as well as in shelters for battered women. Divakaruni says that as a writer, she always wants to connect with women and women’s groups. She is deeply involved I women’s issues and conditions. As per her opinion living in the US made her see and analyses the Indian life and culture objectively and dispassionately. She observed that many women are still trapped in the value system that a man has precedence and power over than and mutely
tolerate all injustices. Critics have some time
criticizes her works for her denigration of the
Indian society and glorification of the taboo-
free modernized society of the West, of the
USA in particular. Divakaruni justifies her
portrayals with an argument that they are
guided by truth, honesty and compassion for
characters. Divakaruni admits that while she
was in India, she was totally immersed in
Indian culture and traditions. She could not
see the exploitative nature of Indian and
South Asian tradition. At that time she had
not thought much about the problems faced
by Asian women and remedies to them. Later
when she was in USA, she could view these
problems rooted in the patriarchal
hegemony. She also confesses that6 even
American society is not free from such evils
of gender bias as even double standards
prevailed regarding women both in East as
well as West.

Through the use of fable, Chitra Divakaruni
has explored the various kinds of problems
encountered by immigrants. Divakaruni
states that “I wrote in a spirit of play,
collapsing the divisions between the realistic
world of 20th century America and the
timeless one of myth and magic in my
attempt to create a modern fable”. Throughout the novel the first person
narrative has been adopted from the
perspective of Tilottama or Tilo who has
learned to extract the essence of the spices
and use them to alleviate pain, solve
problems and help people to live better lives.

Now if one looks up at the theme of 'solution
of all the problems' as one of the central
themes, it is so relevant to modern time.
Weather it is India or any other country in
the world, everyone wants some permanent
solution to their temporary problems, that
too in a magical way with some 'Instant
Essence'. Thus modern time dilemma also
gets reflection in The Mistress of Spices. Her
dilemma is an allegory of the immigrant who
experiences the dual pull of the charm of the
past and the call of the present.

The Mistress of Spices—the phrase is
deliberately gendered to undercut the power
associated with mastering supernatural
powers. Generally as per Indian Myth the
supernatural power is closer to the hearts of
the women than men. In the novel the
protagonist female character Tilo can predict
disasters and look into the hearts of people.
Not only that further the author says that
only in her hands “the spices sang back”. Now
again 'spices' is the word which adds flavor
to Indian basic nature. In India non-
living things become living being emotionally
attached to the human beings. Her trainer the
'Old Mother' always signified that Tilo will
never be the submissive compliant mistress
which the old one expected her to be. Now
again, old women prophesying is very
common Indian imagery. Parallel in
Divakaruni one would observe the inner
world full of diasporic emotions. Tilo is not
impeccable sometimes, the problems of the diaspora are too complicated and she finds it difficult to deal with them. Tilo runs a spice store in Oakland, California. She has created a mini India and boasts of all spices in her shop that ever were in existence, even the lost ones, "I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other place in the world quite like this". Now when she boasts of availability of all the spices including non-existing in the other parts of the world, the reader would feel that she is talking about the essence of India which is intact available in her shop.

According to Tilo many people are attracted to her store as it attracts a large group of people for whom the store is reminiscent of home, a little oasis in their diasporic lives full of problems. Tilo feels that Indians come to the spice store in quest of happiness. “All those voices Hindi, Oriya, Assamese, Urdu, Tamil, English layered one on the other like notes from tanpura (an Indian musical instrument), all those voices asking for happiness except no one seems to know where.” The references of all the Indian languages reminds of unity in variety and diversity in India while reference of Indian musical instrument Tanpura reminds us of rich and aesthetic Indian heritage that has always been recognized and valued by the people across the boundaries. Here she comes up with deep-rooted feelings of not only Indians on foreign land but also the pain of modernization that has brought very superficial sallow life. In her frequent references, India keeps on peeping; the presence of India is a continuous thread which again represents diasporic sensibility.

Indian culture has very specific place and role of a woman in family and social structure. In India, generally a woman in the family knows who requires what- as in the novel Tilo knows about the visitors’ requirement beforehand. This gives an impression of the shop as a home and that too an Indian home. Thus interpretation of such lines also brings India on the screen of our mental map. Within this fable structure Divakaruni has underscored the opaque nature of national borders. *The Mistress of Spices* has been blessed with the power to work magic only for the good of her own people –that is Indians, the others; they must go elsewhere for their need. The first mother, the senior preceptor, had warned her against that. Now in such discrimination, the force that has insisted Indians to move out of their country reacts. Somewhere in such declaration, once colonized mind wishes to retaliate. National boundaries become aggressive in the depiction of such conditional situations

The spice store is described with its sacred secret shelves and functions as a geographical/ textual space which is a repository of a monolithic national identity. It also represents a space for ‘self-indulgence’. The discrimination that brown people face
also gets replicated in the quotes like -

“Dangerous for brown people who come from elsewhere, to whom real Americans might say why?” The Mistress of Spices – Tilò is an amiable spirit who hovers over Indians living in America. For Divakaruni, extenuating the pain of diasporic life is more complex. The diaspora, obviously, cannot leave issue of racialism untouched. Jagjit is estranged and harassed on the basis of racialism. A timid child, he is abused in school for not knowing English or for not belonging to the land of Whites. He is scolded as: “Talk English son of a bitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole.” Tilò tries to restore confidence within him. The racialism in not the only issue Indian immigrants’ face on unfamiliar land there is also another set of problems they face. The problem related to drug addiction or drug delivery the Indians are forced into. In return for it, they had asked Jagjit to ‘carry this packet here, drop off this box there’. Jagjit is doing his duties meticulously waiting to be fourteen when he will get his gift, cold and black, shining and heavy with power in hand, pulsing electric as life, as death passport (his) into real America”. Such phrases come with their helplessness and efforts for the acceptance by the whites. The feeling of belongingness, the urge to be convinced that they belong to the place they live is strongly placed. Tilò is in a way shocked to see him and wonders whether it is her spice remedy, Jagjit’s parents or America that have pushed him to become a drug immigrant who makes it in America, assimilates and prospers economically. There are others who lose their jobs or in the worst case lose their children. Thus what happens to them away from their own land is a pathetic description on certain pages of the novel.

The complexities of diasporic negotiations are corroborated by questions of identity and Divakaruni’s novel tries to capture the nuances that contest the stereotypical images of South Asians as model minorities and unobtrusive citizens. The Mistress of Spices takes us closely into the lives of a wide spectrum of Indians residing in the diaspora. Indian community also has the rich diasporic element towards which the immigrant experience has been that of cultural dispossession and material acquisition: “The rich Indians descend from hills that twinkle brighter than stars….Their cars gleam like waxed apples, glide like swans over the potholes outside my store”. Such descriptions make readers to find India and Indianness around them.

Tilò, the ministering angel, is more worried for those who need her help. In continuum with the title each chapter is named after a spice and discusses the trials and tribulations of an individual and the special characteristics of each and every spices for eg:- “Each spice has a day special to it….color of day break and conch-shell sound.
Turmeric the preserves, keeping foods safe in a land of ......heat and hunger. Turmeric the auspicious spice placed on the ...... over the coconuts at pujas, rubbed into borders of wedding saris.” Through such a description the reader gets recurrent glimpses of spices into a range that surrounds the life of the diasporic Indian. With the help of such descriptions it seems as if the author creates an image of India within the shop. It creates a nostalgic image of India and Indian culture.

The second story is of Mrs. Ahuja which deals with the pain of dispossession. She lived a comfortable life at her father’s place and then she was married to a violent alcoholic man who keeps on abusing her. She is unhappy in America and wants to start afresh in America, but she is unable to break the shackles of womanly duties that she has in her mind. They are the voices of conditioning as she defines them, “The voices we carried them all the way ‘inside our heads”. The story of Mrs. Ahuja appears with two shades: one is of diasporic sensibility and another is of feministic sensibility. It narrates how Indian women are victimized through conditioning; how they are not able to come out of the prison that they have created out of their thinking. The Mistress’s tools can dismantle Ahuja’s house but only when she herself is ready for the challenge; Tilo helps Mrs. Ahuja and then she becomes Lalita by overthrowing the tyrannical structures that have given her pain and compelled her to be brutally raped every night by her husband. Lalita leaves the house of her husband and starts living at a battered women’s shelter. While reading the novel readers do not fail to observe the strong bonding amongst the Indian characters- or female characters of the story. Not only that even Divakaruni cherishes special bonding with female characters she has come up in The Mistress of Spices.

For Geeta the Mistress mixes several spices, ginger for deeper courage, fenugreek for healing breaks and ‘amchur’ for taking the right decision. When Divakaruni describes benefits of various Indian spices, it seems indirectly she declares with subconscious pride the richness of such a great heritage with their medicinal as well as ethical-based worth. Geeta is a part of the paradigmatic diasporic family, where the clashes between first generation & second generation South Asians are inevitable. Geeta’s parents have given her freedom in every way but they are not able to accept her boyfriend. Again the Indian mindset of parents is reflected where daughters are getting most of the opportunities and freedom but to choose life-partner on her own is not much digestible-accepted by Indian parents today also in most of the Indian parts.

In fact, they are horrified as she has chosen to be with a Chicano man (Mexican-American) and get cut off completely from herself. Geeta
the second generation South Asian is not at all prepared for this abrupt and complete reversal of attitude and opinion. She is indeed shocked by the horrible reaction to Juan. Sunaina Maira and Rajni discuss the conflicts between generations in the American Diaspora. Here Divakaruni surfaces two conflicts one is between two cultures and another is between two generations. According to them 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 mainstream culture; at the same time they question the uncritical acceptance of the need for adaptation. The political involvement of the second generation in its building of alliances with other people of color, often conflicts with the first generation’s political agenda, which is typically more rooted in home-country interests”. Thus somewhere in the novel a shade of political concept of ‘being’ also peeps from the shadow. D. B Gavani rightly Comments: “For the second generation Indian like Geeta, the question about identity is differently poised. She challenges continuous identification with patriarchal traditions which she associates with her grandfather. Tilo empathizes with Geeta, tries to assuage their pain and the novel tells us that she succeeds in restoring peace and harmony within the family” (Gavani, 79)

The novel has a thread of feminism within the story line. As per the dictates of the order to disguise, Tilo the Mistress of Spices is a young woman but disguises herself as an old woman. She is restricted to be aware of her own body: “Once the mistress has taken on her magic mistress body, she is never to look on her reflection again.” She is required to bury her own desires and prioritize those of others:” Now this statement very much comes with a patriarchal social order where the desires of woman have little place. A Mistress must carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves”. Such expectations remind the readers of the Indian Hindi movie ‘Astitva’ (Existence) which again reflects the patriarchal approach. Tilottama transgresses many boundaries for all those who need her help, but she cannot be contained within this framework. Indian society has defied women in such a way that there is no space left to live for herself or may be very little space for her own wishes.

Again here in “Arranged Marriage” Divakaruni has spoken of women’s rebellion against the pressures to suppress their desires and their bodies. The orders given to the mistresses clearly duplicate patriarchal struggles and Tilo is keen to break them free. She struggles with her own self and gets involved in an emotional relationship with a Native American man whom she calls Raven.
She transforms herself into a woman, feeling guilty about her 'self indulgence', but is brave enough to face the consequences after it. The conflict within highlight the conditioning of Woman that Indian society expects. The guilt that she feels represents the Indian notion of purity of woman. At the level of body politics, she reformulates her body, her desire to have a sexual relationship with raven by breaking the institutional sanctions, go against the laws of the mistresses. But, Tilo can always sense the danger she is in. When Raven tells her that he wants to escape with her to an earthly paradise, she tells him: “Our love would never have lasted for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it is to be Indian. To be American….There is no earthly paradise. Except that we can make back there, in the soot, in the rubble, in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug dust, the young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and wailing in cells, yes, in the hate, in the fear”. The whole word picture brings the modern world in the mind screen of readers.

The novel validates women empowerment through articulation of their desires. The new woman takes decisions related to her life and accepts the consequences of the same. She is not ready to ignore or overlook what her heart wishes- what are her expectations from her own life. Now Tilo in touch with her own sexuality can no longer relieve others’ pain or even see into the future, she can only live the life of a young woman. She has to extinguish herself so that the woman in her finds a voice follows her desires and search for her own identity beyond the one of ‘a mistress’. She must forsake her domain, the beautiful organized spice store in order to fulfill her desires. At the end of the novel, Tilo transforms into Maya, the young beautiful woman who has abandoned her magical powers, “I, who now have only myself to hold me up” and found her new home through an act of cultural translation. Thus the end leads readers to the beauty of a common life. A human being- be it be a man or a woman- is born with set of emotions: fears, pleasures, angers, disappointments etc. and so is doomed to as well as blessed to cherish them all. No magical world is long lasting as this one.

The novel has adopted a more mature structural configuration to explore the diaspora. Each chapter contains a little picture about an individual, about a cultural encounter. The stories are then woven together through the novel, the sublets shade caught and developments depicted. A variety of cultural codes and icons are recognized as Tilo weaves her tapestry of different lives becomes implicated in the lives of Jaggi, Mrs. Ahuja and Geeta, naming a few. Through the storytelling of Tilo, the form of the fable is effectively used here. The ‘fabulous’ world of Tilo- the mistress gives a surreal quality to the novel. The structures overlap and specific
histories coincide. The advantage of this literary model is that it continually confounds the category of realism; therefore the events in this novel cannot be processed as information. The novel refers its theme of magic realism, lengthy dialogues and the characters that touch the hearts of the readers; as New Yorker Review magazine comments: “Divakaruni’s prose is so pungent, that it stains the page, yet beneath the sights and smells of this brand of magic realism, she deftly introduces her true theme: how ability to accommodate desire enlivens not only the individual heart but a society cornered by change.”

Chitra Divakaruni is fairly prolific as she has written many books in the last decade. The market undercurrents of the first world will make her work available to a large cosmopolitan audience. Readings of her work produce new meanings and new sires of contestation. Therefore she cannot claim to be outside of the power struggling that revolves around the authenticity of voice within the Indian community in the diaspora. The Mistress of Spices gives plenty of sources on diasporic grounds. It enhances the Indian glory into the past and present world at the same time portrays the problems immigrants face as ‘others’. The magical realism of the east, the exotic land viewed by western eyes give a glance of the Indian beauty of spices and their magic. There are various diasporic aspects which we come across in the novel—like changing the names of characters as Tilottama becomes Tilo, Jagjit becomes Jaggi, all these give us a view of the diaspora. Another basic and foremost aspect of diaspora is multiculturalism, which can be noticed through the lives of Geeta, Jagjit & Mrs. Ahuja.

Divakaruni has attained considerable popularity and is sought after by many publishing houses. Her texts are powerful & significant; and effective in mapping the contours of the new South Asian community in USA. It reflects the struggle for identity amongst women and to develop a critique of patriarchal structures that organize the life of the Indian Diasporas. Her own immigrant experiences speak in her writings and enable the Americans to see the richness of India as well as Indian spices. The novel carries the picture of how Indian immigrants can create magic in solving the problems of Indian diasporas.

References

Good management is the art of making problems so interesting and their solutions so constructive that everyone wants to get to work and deal with them.

- Paul Hawken