

**DESIGN THINKING AND CROSS-CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *MISTRESS OF SPICES***

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Abstract

Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's is an ideal interpreter of a cultural multiplicity of India. Her novels imitate Indian, especially Bengali cultural traditions of India in an intimate family array closely related to social, cultural and psychological norms. Culture as a tactic of survival is both transnational and translational. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni a celebrated Poet and writer was born in Kolkata, India, and came to the United States to pursue graduate work, earning an MA at Wright State University and a PhD at the University of California-Berkeley. Her themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, women, immigration, history, myth, and the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world. Divakaruni also writes for children and young adults. *The Mistress of Spices* shows the immigrants who face cultural predicaments in the foreign land and at the same time stick their own cultural beliefs and customs steadily imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Much of Divakaruni's work deals with the immigrant experience, an important theme in the mosaic of American society. She writes to unite people. Divakaruni has faithfully projected Indian culture and tradition in realistic terms in this novel *The Mistress of Spices*.

Key Words: Cross-Cultural Analysis, Globalization, Immigrants, Culture.

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the middle passage of slavery and agreement, the voyage out of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement – now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of global media technologies – make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue.

Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has written more than sixteen novels. Most of her stories, deal with the experience of immigrants to the United States. Generally her characters of the novels are set in Kolkata, and in the Bay Area of California. She is an ideal interpreter of a cultural multiplicity of India. Her novels reflect Indian, especially Bengali cultural traditions of India in an intimate family garb closely related to social, cultural and psychological norms with respect to food. *The Mistress of Spices* elevates various incidents which happen in the life of the protagonist who tries to establish her identity in the Oakland. As Espin points out: 'A Splendid novel, beautifully conceived and crafted'. When we observe the life of Tilothama in the light of her birth and struggle for existence, it is clear that she tries to create her individuality and this gains the sympathy of the readers. The Bengali ethnicity has been visited and revisited again and again to emphasize how the immigrants keep their home culture alive in the foremost and irreconcilable culture of the foreign country.

Mistress of Spices shows the immigrants who face cultural predicaments in the foreign land and at the same time stick their own cultural beliefs and customs steadily imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. TILO, the protagonist of the novel was born in a lower class family as a third girl

child and was felt burden by her parents as another dowry debt. As the cows run dry at the time of her birth she was fed with the milk of ass which helped her in getting the sight and words sooner than others. Being neglected by her parents she led a very sloppy life. When born she was named Nayantara - The star of the eye, star seer, and also the flower that grows by the dust road. However, when she realized her unknown powers and helped the villagers in solving their troubles and finding their lost things she was given luxurious presents as a matter of thankfulness and her household won credit. Even the family members enjoyed the luxury life brought by the fame of her exotic powers.

The Mistress of Spices is her maiden novel that catapulted her into stardom overnight. Amy Tan considers novel as “A dazzling tale of misbegotten dreams and desires weaved with poetry and story teller magic” She too has grown proud and willful. But this does not last long. Her fame spreads far and wide. By her powers she can draw to her whoever she wishes - a lover to her side or an enemy to her feet. But when used faultily and without control can bring destruction beyond imagination. A girl who was once neglected was now chosen to be the best. Once she was last for anything but now she was the first for everything

The scenario of Chitra Banerjee’s novel, *The Mistress of Spices* is analogous to her earlier novel *Arranged Marriage*. It is an authentic perusal of human relationships bedevilled by cultural encounters. Tilo and Raven have a perfect accord with each other. Their relationship is marked by mutual understanding, loving concern and temperamental compatibility. Chitra Banerjee’s real concern is the depiction of personal relationships, as it cuts right to the heart of family life in two different cultures – the East and the West. These novels depict the issues of Divakaruni’s own cultural location in West Bengal in India. She has faithfully projected Indian culture and tradition in realistic terms in these novels. In this article, an approach of Cross Cultural Studies has been done with the various contexts of multiculturalism, post colonialism, and globalization focus on the American character, culture, and people and developing theories and critical debates on globalization.

Through a close analysis of *Mistress of Spices*, this article delineates the dichotomies of race and culture which is uttered is that between San Francisco, the big city that seems to hold all the temptations and which, through the majestic stature of the Golden Gate, is perceived as a symbol of the greatness of America, and Oakland, where Tilo lives and which is home to her secret empire of spices. Major themes of the novel *Mistress of Spices* includes the struggle faced by the immigrants who moved geographically, politically, socially and culturally from its Homeland India, and trying to come to terms with a new existence in an alien land. The spices are used as a symbol of un-American. 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—” (MS 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” (MS 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” (MS 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” (MS 105-272). They succeed in recapturing the Orient in the minds of those who are fascinated by them. Throughout the novel, Tilo is thronged by people who comes to her store to share their immigrant experiences and seeking remedy of their predicaments. Tilo avers:

All those voices, Hindi Oriya Assmese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other like notes from a tanpura, all those voices asking more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where. And so I must listen to the spaces between, must know weigh them in my coral-boned hands (MS78).

The novel *Mistress of Spices* is full of magical-realism. The fifteen chapters are entitled as Tilo, Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, Kalo jire, Neem, Red Chilli,

Makaradwaj, Lotus Root, Sesame and Maya. It portrays South Asian immigrants negotiating their identity in late twentieth century. "I have to live with a hybrid identity. In many ways I'm an Indian, but living in America for nineteen years has taught me many things. It has helped me look at both cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate" (qtd. in Chetty 133).

The spices are characterized by Divakaruni as "holding magic, even the everyday American spices, but the spices of true power are from the mistress birth land" (*MS3*). These chapters narrate Tilo's interaction with her customers, and how she gifts a particular spice to them to solve their specific problems in life. Tilo and her spices are at the center of the interaction between races and cultures, even various Indian cultures, with people of all ages, prejudices, and expectations.

The history of the Tilo' is very interesting. She was born in a small village. Her parents were not happy because she was a girl. Later she was called Bhagyavati. She started to predict forthcoming dangers, finds lost things, shows people the misbehavior of the rich and reveals hidden treasures. But like Tilloatama, the Apsara of Indra's court, she breaks the vows and falls in love with a lonely American. D. B. Gavani avers:

Divakaruni is writing the script of woman's rebellion against the pressure to suppress their desire and their bodies. The order of Mistress clearly replicates patriarchal struggle and Tilo must be to break free for them. She struggles with her own passions as she builds emotional relationship with native American man., whom she calls, Raven. She transforms herself into woman, feeling guilty about herself indulging, but decides to brave the retribution that she would have to face (80).

After a while she was considered as a child of God and people start praising her. Her fame spreads to other villages through the merchants and sailors. When she was young, pirates came into her home, murder her entire family and took her to their ship as prisoner. She overthrows the pirate captain to become the pirate, 'queen, leading pirates to fame and glory, so that the bards sang their fearless exploits.' (19) The migrants who go to America for financial affluence prosper but some don't make good of it., they lose their children drowned in the new culture's glamour. Sunaina Mitra and Rajni observe identity crisis in the introduction to *An Anthology of by South Asians in North America* For first generation South Asian issues of belonging become increasingly complicated the longer they stay in America, and even more profoundly. Boundaries between ethnicities, class, gender, and religion dissolve and re-emerge, as second-generation South Asians... of contested identities and contested forms of belonging (or not belonging) in North America (303).

She reaches a magical island of spices there women call themselves the "mistresses of Spices". First Mother was taking care of all and teaches them too. They were trained in the art of listening and controlling the spices, and then they sent forth into the greater world to aid humanity. They accept her and Nayan Tara chooses the name Tilotamma for her. She is sent to Oakland, California, to a tiny Indian spice shop where she begins her duties of healing the masses through the specifically selected spices, each noted for their particular power. The spices can heal and comfort, but when used wrongly can also ruin or hold back or even ghettoize. She has a vision for her customers.

Tilo takes a beautiful body like the 'apsaras' with the help of the spices in order to make Raven fall in love with her at least for once in her lifetime, 'By tomorrow night Tilo, you will be at beauty's summit. Enjoy well. For by next morning it will be gone'. (*MS263*). She agrees that she is willing to take up any punishment after the following night when she gives herself up wholly to Raven's love. The customers for whose welfare Tilo had prayed are happy and at peace with their lives though not in the way in which she had anticipated. All of them were on the verge of making a new beginning while she was at the end of her life as a mistress of spices in America. She enters the Shampathi's fire and loses consciousness. When on the next morning Raven comes in search of her he finds her laying down unconscious takes her in his hand and moves out to his car. At the same time a huge earthquake occurs which destroys almost the entire Oakland and even her spice shop collapses.

Tilo leaves that place but after going a little distance she stops the car and looks at Oakland which is on fire. She changes her mind to return to Oakland and help people over there. She thinks that it is because of her that everything happened and she wants to help people as she did before. The

question which keeps recurring in Tilo's mind is the reason why the spices had not punished her. They answer her with the following words 'Mistress who was, when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it, that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer, you did not need to undergo that suffering in body also.' (MS305). Tilo tries hard to unite Geeta with parents and her grand father. Tilo transgresses many peripheries to help other out. She is a young woman full of vitality and warmth and builds a passionate emotional attachment with native American, Raven.

In this novel Divakaruni successfully depicts the conflicts of cross-cultural confrontation of the Indian immigrant women who leave behind their home and look for new home in their host culture. America holds out to those immigrants with the promise of a bright future, a world free from, gender and racial differences based on multinational customs, religions, traditions, languages. But the immigrant who carries dreams of aspiration also carries with them, the native identity therefore they face Nostalgia or homesickness. The First mother told her to abide by rules being a Mistress of Spices: First, she can exercise her magical powers for others without leaving the store, and second she has not to touch any human physically. But like Tilloatama, the Apsara of Indra's court, she breaks the vows and falls in love with a lonely American. D. B. Gavani avers:

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They think about their culture, the familiar environment in their homelands. The order of Mistresses clearly replicates patriarchal struggles and Tilo must be made to break free of them. She struggles with her own passions as she builds emotional relationship with a Native American man, whom she calls Raven.

She transforms herself into a woman, feeling guilty about her "self indulgence", but decides to brave the retribution that she would have to face. At the level of body-politics, Tilo's re-formulations about her body, her desire to have a sexual relationship with Raven outside of institutional sanctions, go against the laws of the order of Mistresses. But, Tilo knows the danger, she is in. She can always sense it. They find themselves unable to adjust in a new culture. Because of this alienation from the mainstream American society, most of them become lose their hope.

In United States, where the male and female roles are more fluidly and more freely defined has put the traditional social values under stress, gender roles often are presented as a function of culture. Their ways of adapting is also different. Here is one character Raven's mother Celestina, who is not a white but also remarkable. She hates her own neighbourhood She pretends to be a white as she thinks it gives her self-worth and happiness. The language of the text is very crisp and chiselled, and a powerful tool to measure the contours of Indian immigrants residing in America. Through her kaleidoscopic vision, she gives the snapshots of Indian immigrants' vying for identity, stability, liberty and dignity in new world. She presents the feeling of alienation and marginalisation of immigrants searching a new identity and triumphing the rootlessness. She weaves the theme of myth, magic and romance revolving around the axis of magic realism, and successfully showcasing the broad spectrum of life experiences of migrants. Thus, we can say that Chitra Banerjee vehemently, vigorously and vociferously vents out her feel of agony and angst of immigrants who have come to America their dream land.

The novel is testament of writer's diasporic sensibility, and serves as window to see different perspectives on the role of class, culture, gender and sexuality shaping the cultural psychology of Indian immigrants. Divakaruni examines the cultural impact, propounds new outlook to explore different shades in diasporic rainbow. We sign off with the words of Olivia M. Espin on immigrants and their psychology As migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioural boundaries:

Becoming a member of a new society stretches the boundaries of what is possible. One's life and roles change. With them, identities change as well. Most immigrants and refugees crossing geographical borders, rarely anticipate the emotional and behavioural boundaries they will confront (241).

The first generation of immigrants suffers the trauma of alienation. The second generation of immigrants promotes the aesthetics of acceptance and assimilation. However the third generation of the children of immigrants is free from the burden of divided consciousness but they inculcate the psyche of an isolated self in homeland and host land. The children of immigrants in spite of being born native cannot fully segregate themselves from their ancestral cultural heritage and subsequently bloom to inspire them to reclaim their native cultural identity.

Here modernity clashes with tradition, where Indian culture clashes with American culture and where theory clashes with practice and family becomes a battlefield. American culture becomes the basis for interactions outside the home. Inside the home first-generation Indian-Americans attempt to preserve their cultural and religious heritage and expect to live according to Indian cultural values.

Not only do diasporic people not always speak English very well at first, sometimes they don't even speak the same language as others of their immigrant community. Saturdays, for example, are described as the busiest days for Tilo's shop, during which she hears everyone speaking together all these voices, Hindi Oriya Assamese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other (MS40). There are so many different people and experiences and histories occurring in the store at any given point that they all exist together, and on top of each other. Despite their shared experience of immigration and new establishment in a host country, people also have multiple different primary languages.

Thus Chitra Banerjee, depicts problems faced by Indian immigrants who attempt to assimilate into American lifestyles. She has herself claimed in many of her interviews that the diasporic subjects especially women are concerned about their Culture, identity, an identity which they try to reinvent persistently.

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