

## CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MISTRESS OF SPICES

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### Abstract

*Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's most of the novels deal with the experience of immigrants to the United States. She is a perfect 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 Bengali ethnicity has been visited and revisited again and again to emphasize how the immigrants keep their home culture alive in the dominant and incompatible culture of the foreign country. 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. Divakaruni has faithfully projected Indian culture and tradition in realistic terms in this novel. 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.*

**Key-Words-** *Cross-Cultural Analysis, Globalization, Immigrants, Culture, Diaspora*

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## CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MISTRESS OF SPICES

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**I**ndian-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 a perfect 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 Bengali ethnicity has been visited and revisited again and again to emphasize how the immigrants keep their home culture alive in the dominant and incompatible 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. 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 chapter, 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 articulated 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. They succeed in recapturing the Orient in the minds of those who are fascinated by them.

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. 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' (*Mistress of Spices*, 3). 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 forth coming dangers, finds lost things, shows people the misbehavior of the rich and reveals hidden treasures. 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)

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'. (263). 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.' (305). She dismisses Raven's offer that they find their earthly paradise by telling that it is impossible to find one. Raven changes his mind and returns with Maya, the new name given to Tilo to lead a new life. The novel ends with Tilo finding a new life and new name to give meaning to her existence. She gives herself the name Maya. This name suits her in this new world order where she has only herself to hold her up and show the right path.

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. They think about their culture, the familiar environment in their homelands. 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.

Tilo first encounters the brutality of racism when one of her working class patrons, Mohan, is brutally assaulted by two young white men one evening. As his attackers approach, Mohan, 'hears the steps, fall leaves breaking under boots, a sound like crushed glass'. (169). The two men who attack him are skinheads, and the attack is definitely racially motivated as they slur out, 'Son of a bitch Indian, should a stayed in your own god dam country' (170) The young men classify Mohan who has lived in America for over a decade, in the same category as all immigrants in the United States, just another minority amongst others. As he is being beaten, Mohan experiences such excruciating pain that Divakaruni describes it, 'like fire, like stinging needles, like hammers breaking' (171).

He cannot even wrap his mind around the horrific way he is breaking apart; he tries to defend himself, 'even though it hurts to breathe and a small jagged thought-ribs?-spins up for a moment into the lighted part of his mind' (170). At one point he experiences, 'a blow to the head so hard that his thoughts splinter into yellow stars' (171). His wife Veena is shown to be a very supportive woman, and Mohan is simultaneously shown to be dependent on her support. As Mohan recovers in the hospital, he wants his wife there all the time, even while acknowledging she needs to occasionally go home and rest, 'Only wish Veena could be here, it would be nice to have someone's hand to hold on to when outside the sky turns inky purple like that night' (ibid.). Here Divakaruni has focused on the cross-cultural tensions that arise when crossing national borders. Mohan's story is short and relatively sparse; readers do not receive as much information about him as they do about other characters such as Haroun.

Tilo feels protective and worried about Haroun in a way she cannot quite define, but from very early on she senses his good nature may be short lived, 'O Haroun, I sent up a plea for you into the crackling air you left behind...But there was a sudden explosion outside...It drowned out my prayer' (28). Tilo puts a hand on Haroun's new taxicab, she is overwhelmed with a vision of disturbing physical damage to Haroun, in which she sees someone slumped against a steering wheel; in reflection, she asks herself, 'the skin is it broken-bruised, or only a shadow falling?', As Haroun leaves, Tilo observes him as "silhouetted against a night which opens around him like jaws' (112).

Haroun's body appears to her in this way almost as though she can sense an immediate danger of physical damage. Tilo waits for him outside of his home, she is anxious, referring to, 'footsteps ring as on a fiery anvil, splintering pavement sirens drills through the bones of skull in corkscrew motion followed by images of the 'shatter of brown glass' (228). When Haroun finally stumbles up to his apartment, his body is crumpled and bloody as a result of the attack. The doctor who attends to him says it, 'looks like they used an iron rod. Skull could have cracked like snail shells' (230). The experiences of Haroun are a powerful illustration of the way in which Indian-Americans often experience a shattering of their former selves.

Following the attack, Tilo is present as they take Haroun into his apartment. As they enter, a multiple indicators of his identity is noticed by Tilo on the walls of his home, observing 'whitewashed walls empty except two pictures hanging where his eyes would first fall on waking. A passage from the Koran in a lush curved Urdu script and silver Lamborghini' (229). Hameeda nurses Haroun back to health, it becomes apparent that her support indeed plays an integral role in his recovery. He is angry; he tells Tilo If, 'I catch those bastard pigs, those shaitaans...also thankful for the chance to recover. But also I have been lucky...And I have found such friends - like family they are, a list in which he includes Hameeda first' (282). Ultimately He marries with Hameeda and permanently gives her the care-giving role, 'Haroun who has so much to live for, for whom the immigrant dream has come true in a way he never thought' (283-84).

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 community. She pretends to be a white as she thinks it gives her self-esteem and happiness. Thus, the East-West encounter as a recurrent theme in her novels is directly related to her experience as an expatriate who inherited Indian values by birth and acquired Western values by choosing to live in America. Divakaruni's frequent return to the theme of the East-West encounter and especially of the Indo-American meeting and her masterly treatment

of it in great depth and seriousness shows her genuine and resolute concern for the global and contemporary situation.

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.

The first-generation immigrants are invariably more obsessed by the home they have left behind which is their land of birth and always suffer from a feeling of uprootedness that makes it more difficult for them to adjust. First-generation Indian-Americans are acutely aware of readily apparent cultural differences. 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.

The second-generation problems are of a different kind. Having been born in the new country they are able to become a part of the new culture more easily. They often reject their parents' social expectations. They are also individuals who have broken away from their original communities in moving to the United States. But they face and experience a greater sense of rejection and are constantly reminded by their peers that they are different, that they do not belong to the adopted land and all this leads to a great deal of conflict in the minds of these easily influenced children born and brought up in a foreign land.

The conflict is not only caused by their parents, but also, because they are expected to adhere to different values at home, the child grows up with two distinct personalities. This is especially true of Asian immigrants because, even though they belong to the second or third-generation they continue to remain aliens in the land of their adoption. One of the major reasons for this is the color of their skin. They can never integrate and become a part of the white society of the European. At home and within the local community component they are governed by Indian lifestyle developed by their parents and the broader American community.

The third generation of American-born Indians, however, is more securely placed in the adopted society. Growing up in the West, they acclimatize to its mores and ways of life in a seamless manner, in a way their parents never could. By virtue of knowing India only as visitors and having limited acquaintance with their native culture, the importance of the

'original' homeland for these second generation immigrants is generally related to the background. They do not have any deep-rooted psychological or emotional attachment to India and instead, identify themselves primarily as American citizens.

Geeta's grandfather belongs to the first generation, was still in India after the immigration of his family to America. He comes when his son convinces him to join them in the U.S. saying, 'we are all here, what for you want to grow old so far from your own flesh and blood...I crossed the kalapani and came to this America' (85 ). In America, he has to confront his granddaughter Geeta, and does not understand how she dresses, why she works, why she cuts her hair short, how much makeup she wears, or how she can justify buying a shiny, expensive new car. Nothing about her behavior meets his expectations of how a woman should behave. He always shouts at her American style of life. He complains to Tilo saying that Geeta is coming late at night with her friends after work.

Tilo tries to convince him by telling him that it is America after all, and even in India women are now working. She changes his mind and tries to adjust with the younger generation. Geeta's family is a good example those Indian family in America who still try to follow and keep their culture. And the character of Geeta's grandfather like those Indian people who still value their culture though they go abroad, leaving their country. The Indians who go to settle abroad try to preserve their culture and their way of thinking according to the way it was when they left the country.

In India, the Indians keep changing and accept the western ways of thinking. They are more tolerant towards many things in the younger generation, whereas those who settled abroad still resent them in their children. Tilo hopes that Geeta will be able to find a resolution that allows her to be herself while straddling a balance between the old ways of her family and the new ways of her life in the United States 'Geeta whose name means sweet song, keep your patience your humor your zest for life...Geeta who is India and America all mixed together into a new melody, be forgiving' (87).

It is the children, who suffer the most. It is natural for them to have a conflict, to rebel at times. 'Jagjit with his thin, frightened wrists, who has trouble in school because he knows only Punjabi still, is a second-generation Indian-American. Jagjit whom the teacher has put in the last row next to the drooling boy...Jagjit who has learned his first English word. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot' (38). When Tilo observes him, she wonders if he knows his name means 'world-conqueror' and hopes for his future that he will find someone to support him emotionally 'who will you take him by the hand, who will run with him and laugh with him and say See this is America, it's not so bad' (40).

Thus all three generation are living in America as a minority class and though these people have been settled in America, adopted the American way of life and feel and mourn at the loss that the country has undergone but at the same time are worried about their own existence in the host country. As a result of language barriers, elements of adjustment

to America can be challenging for immigrants on multiple levels. 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 (*Mistress of Spices*, 40). 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 identity, an identity which they try to reinvent constantly. More often than not she creates characters that lack a stable sense of personal and cultural identity and float gleefully in the multi-cultural society of America.

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