

Culture Amalgamation in Chitra Banerjee's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract:

The increasing tide of globalisation has reshaped the landscape of modern literature; texts are crossing national and cultural barriers as budding authors articulate the various voices of those long considered subaltern. At the crest of this new literary wave comes a new generation of South Asian female authors who have begun to leave their own stamp on the entire novelistic world.

*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has distinguished herself as one of the pioneering novelists of South Asian diasporic literature. Her accounts of the experience of the diaspora and its effects on women not only provide insight into the lives of the 1,4 million South Asians who currently reside in the United States, but also present a model for better understanding the cultures that have been confronted as a result of the encounters between the East and West. This study describes the mingling of cultures in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a specialist in the field of Diasporic India in English writing. She has carved out a space for herself in the literary world as an immigrant author. She uses her poetry and prose to create a connection between Calcutta and California. Divakaruni stated in an interview published in *India Currents*, "We Indian-Americans are still in an early immigrant society."*

*Our remembrance of the former land and lamentation at the loss of our roots lends poignancy to our writing. In fact, Divakaruni's works depict the culture and manners of her native India, incorporating both positive and negative characteristics of the country. The captivating novel *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tells the story of Tilo, a mistress who operates a spice shop in Orkland, California. She imparts the flavour of Indian culture and enchants "India" with spices through her artistic skill. The paper examines the appealing manner in which identity becomes a question as a result of multiculturalism, reflections on the personal identity of immigrants, and self-discovery.*

Keywords: multiculturalism, identity, self-discovery, immigrant's life, diaspora etc.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is a captivating narrative with a hint of romance, myth, and poetry, narrated with eloquence. The novel, published in 1997, is

Received: 2 Jan. 2023

Revised: 13 Jan 2023

Final Accepted for publication: 30 Jan 2023

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essentially a biography of the protagonist Tilo, who nostalgically recalls her birth, village, and the story of how she became the mistress of spices. Tilo, who possesses magical spice powers, operates a spice shop in Oakland, California. She is knowledgeable about the divinity of spices, including their origin, aroma, and colour; "from amchur to zafran bow to her commands"; and she provides traditional ingredients and spices for curry.

Countless lives depend on Tilo to untangle them from their issues and assist them in achieving their goals. Blessed with the ability to predict the truth, Tilo was a star-seer and village mascot.

The pirates learned of her, and they abduct her. She stayed with them for over three years as their queen. Suddenly a cyclone struck the ocean, and sea serpents saved her. She decides to travel to the island where the First Mother -Old one will teach her how to master spices. She was prohibited from loving or touching anyone. She is named Tillotama, and following her training, she chooses Oakland to apply her skills, where she is transported by the fire of Shampati.

By creating a new culture, Tilo bridges the gap between Indian and American culture and provides solace and support to expatriates fighting for their survival. She not only sells spices, but also cures, listens to their problems, and provides comfort. Customers include Lalita, a victim of marital violence, Jagjit, a Punjabi child who is insulted and mistreated by his classmates for being Indian, Haroun, a victim of terrorism, Geeta's grandfather, bougainvillea girls, etc. As she falls in love with Raven, an American man who visits her store, her life is transformed. She discovers from his history and identification that he is not Native American. She must accept the penalty for breaching the rules of her training; the store is devastated by an earthquake and the land is struck by a tremor. She endures together, Raven and Maya make the decision to reconstruct the city.

Beginning with a first-person narrative, the work combines reality and fantasy flawlessly. Tilo, an immigrant from India, imparts the flavour of Indian culture and imbues "India" with the enchantment and allure of spices through her eloquence. American culture is a blend of several cultures. Immigrants acclimatise themselves to the new arena in order to survive in the face of enormous cultural, social, and political difference by casting 'India,' sculpting identities, and expressing themselves while tussling to adapt to Diaspora's emergence

of two contrasting civilizations. Children face a variety of difficulties and situations including acceptance and rejection.

Multiculturalism illustrates how immigrants shape their personal, cultural, and social identities, either individually or in groups. In a multicultural culture, it is challenging for individuals to define themselves, communicate with members of other cultural groups, and construct a new home. The identity of immigrants remains in jeopardy because they are unsure of which 'culture' to follow: the culture of their home country, the culture of the new country, or a combination of the two.

Multiculturalism engenders a need for home and a devotion to the native land, resulting in a dual identity with the native land and the new land. The nostalgia-tinged recollections are aroused by the past, people, and locations. Individual identity, national identity, etc., are under crisis.

Food and Culture as Individual Identity

When food and culture become a part of a person's identity, they take on profound, multi-layered significance. It becomes a significant factor in the formation of identity at the levels of community, ethnicity, family, religion, social class, and region. Food profoundly influences both an individual's and a group's sense of identity. It serves as a device for recovering the past.

Eating and eating patterns are vital in defining a culture's ethnic identity, reflecting both individual and collective identities within the society. Immigrants express themselves through the language of Cuisine. In the story, the protagonist Tilo describes in depth every facet of Indian culture, from Indian beliefs and traditions to Indian cuisine. The immigrants yearn for their native land and culture, and Tilo creates a new Indian-American identity using spices. Religions, dialects, and ethnicities coexist harmoniously in India, which exemplifies its rich diversity. Spices are an essential component in Indian cuisine. Not only are spices used to enhance Indian flavour, but they also play a significant role in the novel's growth. It is considered that these spices have their own myth.

Each spice possesses a unique mystic quality for caring for and curing human health. In the narrative, the spices representing Indian culture impart a sense of immortality to the cuisine. Divakaruni incorporates Indian culture into her diction and writing style.

The novel becomes an account of Tilo's autobiography. She possesses magical abilities. Her spice shop symbolises the Indian presence in the United States. In the postcolonial age, India constructs a multicultural sphere through the use of spices. Spices are a necessary household item for the Indian community and evoke sentiments of a lost motherland. The protagonist, Tilo, acts as a bridge between two distinct cultures and economies, forming a new culture. The story is embellished with descriptions of the homeland, which evoke love expressions and longings, separation, and melancholy.

Immigration involves uprooting and replanting. There is a sense of rootlessness among immigrants. When they are trapped between their own country and the new country, immigrants have a perpetual sense of separation and dislocation. They must contend with a sense of rejection by the host community, isolation, identity and cultural conflicts, alienation, exile, and the difficulty of adjusting to their new environment. The immigrants' immersion in two dissimilar spheres ignites a desire for their motherland. For an immigrant, home becomes a realm of mythological longing.

The immigrants traverse time, emotional upheaval, memories, and the desire to return to their homeland. They confront their own identity through the influence of western culture. Culture, attire, and cuisine are distinctive to a certain location.

The story reveals the great diversity of India through the author's artistic representation of the details. Through examining foodways, one's economic, political, social, and cultural identity can be described. With a vast array of spices, Tilo serves as a vehicle for the investigation of India's culinary traditions.

In her work, *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has exoticized India. The novel explores alienation, nationalism, yearning, racism, oppression, terror, human relationships, and desire. The immigrants are torn between the Western way of life and the Indian way of life. The novel depicts the difficulty of reconciling a person's cultural and biological identity with a sense of estrangement and self-transformation in their new homeland,

America. Spices can heal and restore, yet improper application can end in devastation. Using spices, Divakaruni describes the mythology, culture, and superstitions of India.

Individuality of Indian Women

The Mistress of Spices becomes a story about Indian women who are victims and suffer in many ways. Whether Indian or Indian immigrant, women lack a distinct identity. They are victimised in every manner possible. Boys are favoured above daughters in Indian culture, and a mother who gives birth to a girl child is typically criticised. Here, the Indian woman's identity is obscured.

Divakaruni depicts the traditional roles of women in Indian culture as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother in her work. Numerous women in the novel have an identity crisis in society, within their own families, and on a personal level. The novel's female characters strive to strike a balance between family responsibilities and individual satisfaction. As we analyse each female character, we observe that Lalita was born and raised in India and married into an Indian family. Lalitha is referred to as Ahuja's wife, which demonstrates a disregard for her individuality. Lalita is a representative example of an Indian lady who conceals her identity to appease male domination. Ahuja perpetuates the stereotypical image of the Indian wife and attempts to assert his power over her. She was the victim of domestic abuse. Her spouse physically and sexually mistreated her. Tilo comforted her and assisted her in contacting the women's cell. Lalita decided with all her strength to contact the women's support cell, and they moved her away from her abusive husband to a refuge for battered women in another city.

Hameeda is another illustration. She was condemned for having a girl child, and her husband divorced her for this moronic reason. Even though the birth of her daughter was not her fault, she was forced to assume all responsibility for her child. Hameeda and her daughter travelled to the United States, where they were cared for by her brother.

In order to live in the new society, the younger generation is adaptable to the new country while the older age adheres to their customs and culture. Geeta, who was born to an Indian family but raised in the United States, has a mixed cultural identity. Her grandfather, an orthodox Indian, wanted her to marry the grandnephew of a friend and settle in India with her husband's family. Her thoughts are constantly questioned by her grandfather's viewpoints, and he is troubled by her behaviour, attire, and other factors. She turned down the marriage proposal

and notified her family that she is in love with Chicano Juan. The entire family was devastated, and Geeta fled the house. Her grandfather acts in her favour, and Tilo sends him a blend of spices to strengthen him. The family eventually acknowledges her love.

Development of Many Identities

Multiculturalism creates a sense of estrangement, reverence for the indigenous land, and a dual affiliation with the indigenous land and the new land. Tilo has numerous names and identities at each stage of her life, which is precisely what happens to migrants.

Throughout the narrative, her name and identity constantly shifting, demonstrating the complexity of the identity dilemma Indians endure in a foreign country. By the end of the novel, she transforms from NayanTara-Bhagyavati-Tilotamma into Maya, which signifies deception. Tilo serves as a bridge between two distinct cultures, economics, and hydrides, which combine to generate a new civilization. Tilo creates a new Indian-American identity for the immigrants, who yearn for their origin and culture. The immigrants establish a dual identity and become split between Western norms and Indian traditions.

Transformation of Multiculturalism into a Tool of Oppression.

The Mistress of Spices evolves into an oppressive story. It takes time for immigrants to acclimatise to a new society, culture, and people as they construct a new home in their new country. Sometimes the problem of acceptance arises inside the host community, which then humiliates and oppresses the immigrants. This has contributed to their identity dilemma.

Mohan is a victim of America's malicious actions. One evening, two men broke into his Indian food store, attacked him, stole all of the cash, and damaged the store. He suffered both emotional and physical injuries. All of his assets were ruined, and he was forced to leave for India with his wife, as he was paralysed.

Haroun emigrated in pursuit of the American dream. His troubled history has given his life a darker hue, as the rebels who murdered his family stole his land and murdered his relatives. In California, he rides in cabs, but one night he was violently attacked and robbed by a thief posing as a passenger. He was severely hurt and later recovered slowly. This is one event in the story that demonstrates the negative aspect of diversity.

Jagjit, a Punjabi youngster, is bullied and discriminated against by his classmates because he is an Indian. He was ridiculed and mistreated and in excruciating pain. His innocence was stolen by diabolical hands, and he joined a nasty gang as a result. Here, he struggles against his own identity. Tilo assists him in enrolling in Kwesi's karate training, which will allow him to overcome his weaknesses and redefine his identity.

These stories illustrate the dangers immigrants confront while pursuing their hopes and livelihoods. The new land takes advantage of their helplessness and torments them. The immigrant's new identity causes him grief.

Conclusion

The novel depicts the lives of immigrants of many cultures, customs, myths, and beliefs. Certain characters in the story are unquestionably influenced by multiculturalism in their identity construction.

Multiculturalism becomes a cultural patchwork. It demonstrates how the novel's protagonists construct their individual, cultural, social, and national identities inside themselves or in groupings. In a multicultural culture, it is challenging for individuals to define themselves, communicate with members of other cultural groups, and construct a new home. The identity of immigrants is in jeopardy because they do not know which 'culture' to follow: the culture of their home country, the culture of the new country, or a combination of the two.

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