



Cultural Influence in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni *The Mistress of Spices*

E.Angiline Kam Nalathachimiz (Corresponding Author) II MA English, Department of English , School of Science and Humanities, Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology ,Chennai-600119 , Mail ID;angelinkam920@gmail.com

Ms.S.Aishwarya(Co-Author) Assistant Professor , Department of English, School of Science and Humanities , Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai-600119 , Mail ID;aishwaryaselvam96@gmail.com

Abstract:

Culture plays an important significance in Divakaruni's novels. Divakaruni, an Indian-American writer, employs diverse strategies and styles in all of her novels. This study tries to examine the cultural influence of the protagonists in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*. Cultural influence examines the protagonists' journeys in both the host country and their birthplace. Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* explores the relevance of Indian culture and the protagonists' attachment to it, as well as their inner battle in an unfamiliar environment. She promotes our cultural ideas and traditions by highlighting the healing benefits of old spices. Tilo, previously known as Nayan Tara in India, undergoes a transition as she becomes a Mistress of Spices, a position that connects her closely to her Indian roots and ancient traditions. The spices she distributes are not simply culinary ingredients, but also symbols of the cultural history she wishes to preserve. Each spice symbolizes a particular facet of Indian culture and mythology, connecting the characters to their roots and traditions .Divakaruni vividly depicts the immigrant experience, emphasizing the difficulties of assimilation and the longing for home. Customers at Tilo's shop are mostly Indian immigrants dealing with concerns of identity, cultural displacement, and the pursuit of the American Dream. The novel's stories highlight the difficulty of preserving one's cultural background while evolving to a new environment . Divakaruni's writing style reflects her influence on her own culture.

Key Words: Mythology , Self-Acceptance , Dual Identity , Cultural Transition , Magical Realism

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author, poet, and teacher of writing. Her work has been published in over 50 magazines, including the Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker, and her writing has been included in over 50 anthologies. Her books have been translated into 29 languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, and Japanese. Born in Kolkata, India, she came to the United States for her graduate studies, receiving a Master's degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley.

To earn money for her education, she held many odd jobs, including babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, slicing bread in a bakery, and washing instruments in a science lab. At Berkeley, she lived in the International House and worked in the dining hall. She briefly lived in Illinois and Ohio, but has spent most of her life in Northern California, which she often writes about. She currently lives in Houston, Texas. Divakaruni teaches in the nationally ranked Creative Writing program at the University of Houston. She serves on the Advisory board of Maitri in the San Francisco Bay Area and Daya in Houston. Both are organizations that help South Asian or South Asian American women who find themselves in abusive or domestic violence situations.

She served on the board of Pratham, an organization that helps educate underprivileged children in India, for many years, and is currently on their emeritus board. Divakaruni lives in Houston with her husband Murthy, her two sons Anand and Abhay (whose names she has used in her children's novels) and Juno, the family dog. 2 Pen Syndicated Fiction Awards, 1993 and 1994, Gerbode Foundation Award, California, 1992, Honorable mention, Paterson Poetry Prize, 1992, for Black Candle, Santa Clara Arts Council Award, California 1990, 1994, Editor's Choice Award, Cream City Review, 1990, Barbara Deming Memorial Award, New York, 1989, The Hackney Literary Award, Birmingham-Southern College, Alabama, 1988.

The Mistress of Spices (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novel that blends magical realism with a deep exploration of cultural identity, love, and the immigrant experience. Set in contemporary Oakland, California, the story revolves around Tilo, a mystical shopkeeper who is trained in the ancient art of using spices to help those in need. The novel was widely recognized for its evocative prose and imaginative blending of myth and reality, leading to its shortlisting for the Orange Prize (now known as the Women's Prize for Fiction) in England and being named one of the best books of 1997 by the Los Angeles Times.

The novel's success led to its adaptation into a film, also titled The Mistress of Spices, released in 2005. The film was directed by Paul Mayeda Berges, with a screenplay co-written by Berges and his wife, Gurinder Chadha, who is known for directing films like Bend It Like Beckham. The movie stars Aishwarya Rai as Tilo and Dylan McDermott as Raven. The 2005 film adaptation of The Mistress of Spices brought the novel's magical realism to the screen, with Aishwarya Rai's portrayal of Tilo capturing the character's mystical and complex nature. The film, however, took certain creative liberties with the source material, simplifying some

aspects of the plot and emphasizing the romantic storyline between Tilo and Raven. While the film was visually striking and featured strong performances, it received mixed reviews from critics. Some praised the film's attempt to bring a unique story to a wider audience, while others felt that it lacked the depth and nuance of the novel. Despite the mixed reception, the film contributed to the global visibility of South Asian stories and characters in cinema.

The *Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novel that blends magical realism with a deeply personal exploration of identity, culture, and love. The story centers around Tilo, a woman trained in the ancient art of using spices to help others. Tilo is not just an ordinary shopkeeper; she is a Mistress of Spices, trained on an island where women are taught to harness the mystical powers of spices to assist those in need. Each spice she uses carries specific properties and powers, and Tilo has dedicated her life to serving the people who visit her shop in Oakland, California. Tilo was born in India as Nayan Tara and, as a child, showed an unusual connection with the natural world. She was eventually kidnapped by pirates, where her ability to foresee the future saved her life. This ability led her to the mystical island where she was trained under the strict guidance of the Old One. Tilo takes on the name of a goddess, Tilottama, and is given the responsibility to serve others without ever stepping outside her shop or engaging in personal relationships.

Her life, however, takes a turn when she meets Raven, a Native American man who comes into her store. Unlike other customers, Raven connects with Tilo on a deeper level, awakening emotions she had long suppressed. As they grow closer, Tilo finds herself drawn to him, and this desire leads her to break the sacred rules of her training. She begins to use the spices for her own desires, seeking out customers outside of her shop, and engaging in a forbidden romance with Raven. Tilo's actions have dire consequences. The spices, which are supposed to be used with utmost respect and care, turn against her. As she disregards the rules, the magic of the spices starts to punish not only her but also those she cares about. The lives of her customers begin to unravel, and Tilo realizes that her disobedience is causing harm.

Faced with the devastating effects of her choices, Tilo understands that she must make a sacrifice to protect Raven from the curse of the spices. In a final act of love, she decides to spend one last night with Raven, knowing that she must leave him afterward to prevent further harm. After their night together, Tilo accepts her punishment, which manifests as a destructive earthquake that obliterates her shop. Despite the destruction and the challenges she faces, Tilo survives the earthquake. The novel concludes with a sense of hope and redemption, as Tilo and Raven reconcile. They decide to rebuild the shop together, symbolizing a new beginning not just for their relationship, but for Tilo's identity and purpose. Tilo's journey reflects the struggle between duty and desire, tradition and change, ultimately leading her to a deeper understanding of herself and the world around her.

The *Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a rich tapestry that weaves together myth, magic, reality, and the complex issues of culture, identity, and the immigrant experience. The novel explores

these themes through the life of Tilo, a mystical shopkeeper who navigates the challenges of her own identity and the struggles of the Indian immigrant community in America.

Myth and Magic the novel's central theme is the tremendous interplay between myth and magic. Tilo, born Nayan Tara in India, is chosen to train as a Mistress of Spices. Her quest begins with her kidnapping by pirates, which leads her to discover her amazing talents, such as seeing into the future and manipulating natural elements. This introduces her to a mythical world, as she is transported to a fabled island where the Old One trains women in the ancient technique of managing the power of spices. Each spice possesses mystical characteristics, ranging from turmeric's healing power to red chili's capacity to elicit passion. Tilo, renamed after the goddess Tilottama, is subject to rigorous rules: she must never leave her shop, remain unmarried, and only utilize the spices for the benefit of others. The enchantment of spices is both a blessing and a curse. They enable Tilo to assist the Indian population that visits her shop by meeting their emotional and physical needs. However, this magic has limitations and laws that, if broken, might result in severe repercussions. Tilo's connection to spices is deeply spiritual, mirroring ancient Indian mythologies in which natural ingredients are venerated and revered as powerful deities.

Reality and Immigrant Experience While the story is infused with fantasy and magic, it also depicts a harsh reality: the lives of Indian immigrants in America. Through Tilo's encounters with her customers, the novel dives into the challenges of the Indian diaspora. Many of her customers are torn between their Indian background and modern American society. This cultural contradiction causes feelings of alienation and identity crises. For example, Jagjit, a young Sikh kid, is bullied and stereotyped at school because of his turban and traditional clothes. Tilo uses spices to help him gain strength and confidence, but his narrative illustrates the sad realities of cultural intolerance. Similarly, Geeta, a young lady from a traditional Indian household, struggles to balance her desire to live a modern, independent life with her family's expectations of her. These characters represent the challenges of negotiating a bicultural identity, as old world norms frequently clash with modern world freedoms.

Cultural and Identity Crisis Tilo herself personifies the issue of identity struggle. As a Mistress of Spices, she is expected to give up her personal identity and become a vessel for the spices' power. Throughout the narrative, she battles with her imposed identity. Her desire to Raven, a Native American male, exposes this internal conflict. Raven provides a link to another world—one of personal freedom and love, which Tilo has denied herself. Tilo's relationship with Raven forces her to confront her desires, causing her to violate the sacred rules of her training. This rebellion against her defined identity as a Mistress of Spices represents the larger struggle of many immigrants grappling with their cultural identities. Tilo's internal turmoil reflects the immigrant experience of attempting to maintain one's cultural roots while adapting to a new environment. Her voyage represents the immigrant's journey, in which past and present, tradition and modernity must be harmonized.

Predicament of Indian Immigrants the novel reflects the collective plight of Indian immigrants in America by delving into their personal and community issues. Tilo frequently sees lonely, disenfranchised immigrants who are looking for a sense of connection. They face challenges such as racism, cultural dislocation, generational disputes, and the drive to assimilate while retaining their cultural identity. For example, Lalita, a woman locked in a violent marriage, exemplifies the difficulties that women encounter when trying to break free in a foreign area due to societal expectations. Haroun, a cab driver, longs for the place he left behind and feels detached from his current situation. These stories represent the greater immigrant experience, in which the pursuit of the American dream is frequently plagued with difficulties and disappointments. Tilo's function as Mistress of Spices positions her as both a healer and a spectator to these conflicts. She employs the spices to assist her customers in their predicaments, but her involvement also shows magic's limitations in resolving deeply ingrained cultural and personal identity difficulties.

According to Divakaruni's book *The Mistress of Spices*, spices do more than merely flavoring our meals; they also reflect our culture. Spices may heal wounds, aid survival, inspire love, and alleviate homesickness. Each chapter focuses on a specific spice and covers its distinctive name, functions, and, as Tilo points out, "each spice has a day special to it" (MS, 13). The spices might be interpreted as symbols of Indian culture. They provide Indians with a taste and scent of home during their stay in America.

Divakaruni's writing style reflects her influence on her own culture. She aims to showcase our cultural ideas and traditions via the representation of old spices. Her novels also explore the identity issue experienced by immigrants. Divakaruni's narrative highlights the relationship between cuisine and culture. Divakaruni's writings highlight the values of India and Indians.

According to Soumyajyoti Banerjee and Amrita Basu's article in the *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*, it is important to revive Indian traditions by eating Indian food at home, as the outside world (in this case, American society) is not in line with Indian customs. Nation and cuisine have long been tightly linked. When living in a foreign land, it's important to maintain a sense of belonging to one's own country. This can be achieved the consumption of native foods (129). Tilo, a character in the story, expressed concern that some Indians are abandoning traditional traditions, "My American, how you have romanticized my land and my people... The Indian culture isn't quite what you think" (MS, 213).

In India, peasant girls have the custom of tying their hair into a single or two braids. "A girl her hair tied in twin tight braids, oiled and obedient, her legs pressed together with the way her mother has told her nice girls to sit." (MS, 63). Divakaruni's writings demonstrate her love for her homeland and culture, as evidenced by her descriptive style. *The Mistress of Spices* is a novel about personalities and cultures. India's customs and social interactions are greatly influenced by American culture. Divakaruni's work primarily focuses on the disparities between two cultures.

All countries pride themselves on preserving their cultural heritage. People in a country are proud to showcase their cultural identity wherever they go. Divakaruni's protagonists value their culture and proudly display their Indian identity in the host country. Some people want to shed their cultural identity and embrace a new culture while moving to a new place, while others use foreign culture to supplement their own cultural values.

Culture encompasses shared traditions, festivals, cuisine, ethnicity, language, class, race, and a sense of community. Clothes are an essential component of any culture. Men appear to suffer less as their cultural clothing remains consistent at national and international levels, whereas women face more conflict. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo maintains her Indian identity by donning traditional clothing. Culture change is influenced by societal elements such as ecology, socioeconomics, politics, and religion. Diaspora encompasses cultural aspects such as dietary habits and language. The research piece critically examines one's homeland's cultural values. Culture is a social inheritance that fosters community and communication. It consists of various concepts and objects; it is also known as tradition. Every human community has a chain of culture and an intellectual system. Cultures have unique meaning systems shaped by norms, values, attitudes, ideas, rituals, customs, faith, and beliefs.

Each society has a culture, no matter how simple it is, and every human person is cultured in the sense that they participate in some cultural activity. The key features of culture are learnt, they must be shared by a group of people, they are cumulative, they cause cultural change, and they result from cumulative quality. No culture exists in a permanent state. It is continually changing as new ideas and techniques are introduced, while old methods are updated and abandoned. Culture as a whole is a system with mutually reliant components. Culture enables individuals to reach their full potential as human beings. It establishes principles of proper behavior for life in society. Culture is passed down from generation to generation through socialization and spread throughout society.

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