

Mapping Cultural Hybridity in the Selected Diasporic Indian English Novels

Sujata Ashok Gaikwad

Research Student

S.N.Arts,D.J.MalpaniCommerceand B. N. Sarada

College, Sangamner

Emailid—sujataantre@gmail.com

Dr. Shrikant Rambhau Susar

Associate Prof. in English

PVPCollegeofArts, Science

andCommercePravaranagar

Email-shrikanta.susar@gmail.com

Abstract

Cultural hybridity has emerged as a significant theme in diasporic literature, particularly in the works of authors such as JhumpaLahiri, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, V. S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, AmitavGhosh, Kiran Desai, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This paper aims to explore cultural hybridity within the context of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's selected novels. It analyzes how Divakaruni's characters negotiate their identities between two cultures—the culture of their homeland and that of their host country. This study highlights the complexities of cultural assimilation and the manifestations of hybridity in Divakaruni's work, focusing specifically on her portrayal of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants, identity crises, and the intersection of tradition and modernity. The paper critically analyzes primary texts such as *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), alongside secondary scholarly resources. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how diasporic literature reflects the multicultural realities of contemporary society.

Key Words

Cultural Hybridity, Transculturation, Identity Formation, Immigrant, Nostalgia, Loneliness.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American writer who has significantly contributed to Indian diasporic literature. She mainly focuses on the experiences of South Asian immigrants through her works. She explores women's lives and their struggles through themes of cultural displacement, loss of identity, cultural conflict, and the search for belonging in a foreign land. Divakaruni's works extensively explore themes of cultural displacement, cultural hybridity, and identity crisis.

Divakaruni's stylistic decisions also contribute to her thematic preoccupations. She draws on magical realism, symbolism, and multi-perspective narrative to address displacement. In *The Mistress of Spices*, magical realism is not simply a literary device but, to some extent, a metaphor for an immigrant's mediation among a range of realities—spiritual, cultural, and social. Signs of the sacred abound in her fiction, as spices, food, and rituals become emblems of cultural hybridity, memory, and continuity that uprooted communities carry with them even within alien landscapes. These symbolic anchor points are particularly important when considering women's experiences, as domestic spaces, family relations, and customs frequently constitute the locations where cultural preservation is most keenly experienced.

Compared to other Indian diasporic writers, Divakaruni's emphasis on the emotional and cultural trials faced by women stands out. Bharati Mukherjee, for instance, usually foregrounds assimilation and the clash with the host society, depicting her characters' migration as a more outwardly social experience. Jhumpa Lahiri, by contrast, foregrounds nuanced struggles with culture and identity through evocative realism. Divakaruni sets herself apart by combining these techniques with myth and allegory to create stories that are both intimate and universal.

The generational context is evident in Divakaruni's recent work, especially in *Before We Visit the Goddess*, revealing that cultural self-alienation is not merely a personal process of discovery but one that continues across generations. The text maps the challenges of three generations of women—Sabitri, Bela, and Tara—each embracing tradition differently while constantly dealing with the pressures of migration and identity. Sabitri's struggles in India represent internal cultural displacement prior to migration; Bela migrates to America and experiences external and social displacement; and Tara represents a unique case—a second-generation immigrant negotiating her parents' dual identity alongside her own. Through its portrayal of multigenerational dynamics and its representation of how displacement shapes familial and individual identity over time, Divakaruni's work constitutes an important contribution to the study of diasporic literature.

Literary Review

The review of literature explores the interaction between culture and identity crisis within postcolonial and diasporic contexts, highlighting significant theoretical frameworks. The relationship between two cultures—as loss of identity and as a fluid sense of self—has been examined through the works of key thinkers such as Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Spivak. These theorists address the fragmented, hybrid, and contested nature of identity, as well as racial discrimination, alienation, and issues of migration.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" focuses on cultural hybridity, where identity crisis is formed in the interstitial spaces between cultures. This framework challenges binary oppositions and highlights the creation of new cultural meanings through negotiation and resistance.

Stuart Hall's examination of identity rejects essentialism, proposing that identities are historically contingent, situational, and marked by heterogeneity. His critique of national identity underscores its exclusionary nature and advocates recognition of cultural diversity and fluidity.

Gayatri Spivak's work foregrounds the subaltern voice, particularly the marginalized position of women within colonial and postcolonial narratives. Her concept of the subaltern as silenced by both colonial and patriarchal structures reveals intersections of power and identity. Spivak's argument for "writing the body" highlights the subaltern's need for self-representation to challenge dominant discourses. Drawing from women's lived "ordeal," she emphasizes the gendered aspect of migration, arguing that women's displacement carries distinct meanings shaped by social expectations imposed by society, family, and the self (Spivak 287).

The diasporic experience, as examined by scholars such as Avtar Brah, further complicates notions of identity. Brah's concept of "diaspora space" offers a useful framework for understanding these dynamics

through evolving webs of relationships and intersections formed by homeland ties, host-land demands, migratory histories, and globalizing processes over time (Brah 181).

This part of the paper establishes that culture and identity crisis are deeply intertwined, evolving through continuous negotiation and adaptation, and highlights the transformative power of hybridity. From this perspective, literature and theory together offer a nuanced understanding of identity in a globalized, postcolonial context.

Critical Analysis of the Selected Novels

Divakaruni's contribution to diasporic literature lies in her ability to render the ethereal experience of cultural displacement in concrete, gendered terms. Her novels often oscillate between myth and realism, magical and mundane registers, to represent the complexity of migrant life.

Cultural alienation is depicted through folklore and surrealism in her debut novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). The protagonist, Tilo, is an immigrant shopkeeper as well as a mythological mistress of spices, embodying diasporic identity. The limitations imposed upon her—such as the prohibition against touching outsiders—replicate the parameters of migrant life: the need to retain cultural purity while engaging with a foreign society. The novel implies that displacement is not only external but also profoundly internal, shaping emotions, relationships, and desires.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, alienation and isolation are not secondary experiences but lie at the core of the diasporic condition. Through Tilo's restrictions, Haroun's racial conflict, Geeta's generational divide, and Lalita's gendered oppression, Divakaruni demonstrates how displacement fractures intimacy, communication, and recognition. These experiences resonate with broader theories of cultural dislocation proposed by scholars such as Brah, Hall, and Bhabha, which suggest that migrants exist on a perpetual tightrope between alienation and rootedness. The novel thus argues that estrangement is not merely an individual fate but a structural condition of diaspora shaped by race, gender, class, and cultural hybridity.

Bhabha argues that hybridity is less about simple mixing and more about producing a "third space" in which new cultural forms can emerge (Bhabha 55). Tilo exemplifies this hybridity: neither entirely mythical nor fully human, neither completely Indian nor fully American. Her store functions as a third space where multiple cultural realities converge. Indian traditions are preserved through spices, yet these traditions adapt within a diasporic context while addressing contemporary issues such as racial violence, domestic abuse, and generational tension. In this way, Tilo's hybrid identity becomes productive, creating a site of negotiation where voices of displacement are articulated and partially transformed.

Racial tension in the novel is also depicted through acts of violence and aggression against South Asian settlers. Community members recount experiences of verbal abuse and intimidation, primarily by white Americans who view them as unwanted interlopers. Divakaruni situates these experiences within a broader postcolonial diaspora, where immigrants occupy an ambiguous "third space," never fully American yet distanced from India (Bhabha 56). Racism, therefore, functions not merely as cultural misrecognition but as part of a systemic reproduction of marginality.

Before We Visit the Goddess (2016), by contrast, adopts a more restrained, intergenerational realist perspective. Through three generations—Sabitri, Bela, and Tara—the novel traces the inheritance of

cultural displacement. Sabitri's mobility within Bengal represents displacement within India, while Bela's relocation to the United States results in vulnerability, disillusionment, and alienation. Tara, a first-generation American, experiences yet another form of displacement—rootlessness rather than nostalgia for the homeland. The novel suggests that while cultural displacement transforms across generations, it continues to carry emotional weight.

Bela, who migrates to America to live with Sanjay, remains emotionally distant from her mother. In a letter, she asks Sabitri to advise Tara against dropping out of college. While writing to her granddaughter, Sabitri reflects on her own struggles, recalling her departure from her mother, Durga, to pursue higher education in Kolkata. Aware of education's transformative power, she writes:

“Granddaughter, people look down on a woman without education. She has few options. To survive, she is forced to put up with ill-treatment. She must depend on the kindness of strangers, an unsure thing. I do not want that for you.” (BWVG 13)

Bela's deep homesickness and longing for her life in Kolkata exemplify nostalgia, a central theme in diasporic narratives. Her memories of familiar surroundings contrast sharply with her unsettling reality. At eleven years old, Bela is relocated from urban Kolkata to Assam due to her father's job. In the unfamiliar environment, she feels like an outsider and yearns for her former life and friends. This displacement mirrors the broader diasporic themes of uprooting and loss. Her longing for familial intimacy is further complicated by emotional distance within the family and her father's alcoholism.

The novel thus maps the challenges of three generations of women, each negotiating migration and identity differently. Tara, born and raised in the United States, is neither fully Americanized nor deeply connected to Indian traditions. Estranged from her divorced parents, she drops out of college, faces unstable relationships, and lacks professional direction. Her fragmented identity is captured in Divakaruni's description:

“She was a puzzle, with her Indian features and Texan boots... What kind of Indian family, even in America, would produce such a hybrid?” (Divakaruni, BWVG 107)

Tara's lack of attachment to either “home” or “homeland” leaves her culturally disoriented. Yet, unconsciously, she seeks guidance from elders during moments of crisis and forms connections with individuals of Indian origin, such as Mr. Venkatachalapathy and Mrs. Mehta, indicating an underlying pull toward cultural belonging.

Conclusion

The discussion in this paper demonstrates that the relationship between culture and identity is shaped by constant negotiation, adaptation, and transformation, particularly within postcolonial and diasporic contexts. Identity is not static but evolves through historical, social, and political forces, intersecting with class, race, gender, and globalization. The theoretical contributions of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Spivak illuminate the fluidity and hybridity inherent in identity formation. Bhabha's concept of the third space explains cultural negotiation, Hall challenges essentialist identity models, and Spivak foregrounds the double marginalization of women.

The diasporic condition further underscores identity's fluidity, as nostalgia for a mythic homeland coexists with adaptation and hybridity. Ultimately, the analysis affirms that culture and identity are evolving constructs shaped by interaction, resistance, and synthesis, redefining belonging in an interconnected world.

References

Primary Texts

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Before We Visit the Goddess*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.
---. *The Mistress of Spices*. New York: Anchor Books, 1997.

Secondary Texts

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.
Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, pp. 222–237.
Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. Routledge, 2007.
Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson, 2006.
Spivak, GayatriChakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

Cinematic Text

The Mistress of Spices. Dir. Paul MayedaBerges. Perf. AishwaryaRai, Dylan McDermott, and AnupamKher. Entertainment Film, 2005.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.