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## CULTURAL CLASH AS A POWERFUL FORCE IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVEL THE MISTRESS OF SPICES

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### Abstract

*Culture has remained one of the favourite themes in the Indian English novelists. The theme most commonly referred as east – West encounter that has been considered as “Classic theme”. There is hardly any Indian novelist who has not responded on the theme of East-west encounter in its carried aspects. Thematically, in the novels delineating this theme, the major characters represent either the culture of the East or the West and the events of the novels initiate the process of cross – cultural interactions at various levels, including family level. In fact, in some of the novels the institution of family has been used as a device to explore various aspects of cultural theme. The growth of harmony or disharmony between them has symbolic significance in the larger socio-cultural context.*

**Keywords:** *Nostalgia, Home, Diaspora, Immigrants, Immigrants Identity*

Divakaruni's inquiry into trans-cultural-ism is at once allusive, subtle and lyrical which cuts through the Indian stereotypes and prevents the reader with powerful allegories of transformation and change, example “Daksha to whom no one listens so she has forgotten how to say, “is the work horse in the family hierarchy of an agine mother-in-law and a husband who will not help around the house.

The Mistress of Spices is an immigrant woman's journey from established traditional paradigms of the past to an uncharted future in America. Divakaruni's books, which are set in both India and America says about featured Indian born women torn between old and new world values. She gives looser-like insight and skilled look at her characters and their respective worlds, which are filled with fear, hope, and discovery.

One of the prominent Diasporic writers is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Chitra Baerjee concentrates on immigrant experience, human relationships, and family relationships. Human relationships are an essential and inherent part of humanity. As Divakaruni says, “Home is where you move frequently through the dark” (qtd. in Sandhya 205) The mistress of Spices is a novel of extraordinary depth and sensitivity focuses the repercussions of multiculturalism. Tilo becomes in the lives of the customers and helps them through abusive husbands, racism, generational conflicts and drug abuse.

Tilo, the rebellious immortal, who in the guise of an old woman operates the spice shop, must decide how far to go in helping the troubled mortals she encounters in Oakland's mean streets. More important, she must also decide if she will allow herself to transgress the taboo of loving a mortal, which will cause her to lose her divine existence.

The object of her taboo feelings is Raven, a bitter native American who finds both psychological and spiritual healing through his love for Tilo and who urges her to run away with him. Raven lives a pastoral life which he describes it as “an earthly paradise”, away from the problems of Urban America.

Divakaruni strikes a rare balance between eastern mysticism and contemporary American culture. Before she writes her magical novel, The Mistress of Spices, Chitra Divakaruni was intrigued and fascinated by the bond between women. In this novel India women are forced to do certain things. They are trapped in abusive marriages or relationships. They does not know how to cope with the more free-wheeling western society. Though some of them had lived in America for a decade they did not know life outside their homes.

The Mistress of Spices is a novel of character and cultures. Life in India, particularly customs and the way people interact with each other is often contracted with American society. Divakaruni, for most of the novel, sticks to what she does best the contrasts between two diverse cultures. She expertly weaves the lives of all the characters together.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes, “Women in particular respond to my work because I am writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to related to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to b e prejudice when they meet them in real life” (qtd.in Chaturvedi 55). Divakaruni's writings focus on women from India who are caught between two worlds. Her characters are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes, struggling to carve out on identify of their own. She deals with a variety of issues in her books, including racism,

interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion and divorce. Her writings are inspired by her imagination and the experiences of others.

The most interesting aspect of this novel is how each character deal with their increasing Westernization. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has beautifully observed the creeping onset in this cultural change. Divakaruni has also added a dash of cultural clash and the growing maturity to each of the character.

In response, Sir John Evelyn, in his own manual *Acetaria*, counters, "It might be that the woman's "familiar acquaintance" is the very thing necessary to remove the threat of strangeness... the mere incorporation of such substances into recipes makes them less strange and unacceptable." (182). This is exactly what Divakaruni accomplishes in this novel. She combines the unfamiliar, the female, Indian Immigrant experience, with the familiar, urban life in America, blending the two into a magical narrative that relates a gifted young woman's plight as an outsider in southern California.

Divakaruni, in analyzing the role the spices play in her novel, describes how "they stand for aspects of the culture that Indian immigrants carry with us and can heal us, but that when used wrongly can also destroy us or hold us back, or ghettoize us" (3) She also explains the traditional expectation of Indian woman in their native culture as " a daughter, a wife, a good daughter – in –law, and his wife in the united states. These values, when transmuted to include the value system of a more liberated society, such as America, can remedy and placate in the face of stereotypes and racism. However, as exemplified in the character of Lalita, when maintained in ignorance, such values can oppress. As well, the relativity of the term "good" lends itself to an open interpretation in application to the behavior of Indian women inside the home. Thus, it can be extended to signify a restrictive servitude that ultimately sublimates rebellion for fear of castigation ore abandonment:

*Began to hear stories in the community of women who had Problems, who had come here (to the United States) but Didn't have the support structures or people they could tell Their problems to. They didn't feel comfortable going to a mainstream organization because culturally they would not be understood. There is often a lack of sensitivity to Indian culture in the mainstream shelters, which are often run by well-meaning feminists, but people who don't understand The context within which arranged marriages are created.*

Divakaruni, understanding the worth of the influential Indian elite in developing her narrative, injects them into the story as proof "that the colonized subaltern subject is

irretrievably heterogeneous" a multi-starta socioeconomic classes inclusive of the poor, working class, embodied by the narrator and the majority of her clientele, and the wealthy, protean Indian rich, who have adapted to the all-accepting climate of U.S Capitalism.

Divakaruni addresses these "ambiguities and contradictions" in her characterizations of the rich Indians who frequently visit Tilo's store. The descriptions are at once specific and universal:

*The car stops, the uniformed chauffeur jumps out to open The gold-handled door, and a foot in a gold sandal steps Down. Soft and arched and almost white. Rosepetal toes Curling in disdain away from what lines the street, wadded paper, rotting peels, dog shit, shucked-off condoms thrown from the back windows of cars" (78) . The combination of images speaks for itself-people of a skin colour not-quite-black and ant-quite-white, bedecked in the finery of the Caucasian elite, curl their toes, not nose, at the filth lining The sidewalk in front of Tilo's store. In doing so, they symbolically reject the plight of the poor, common indiana immigrant in favour of assimilation with the white rich, an incomplete amalgamation of foreign and native.*

Woven throughout the narrative of *Mistress* is another tale of oppression, one associated with the theme of familial expectations of Indian woman in America. This account of rebellion and exclusion is not related from the point of view of oppressed female, Geeta, but from her grandfather's perspective. This inversion in standpoint heightens the reader's sensitivity to sympathy for an intelligent Indian woman caught between love and custom. Her grandfather says:

*But mental peace I am not having, not even one iota, since I Crossed the kalpani and came to this America he tells me Once again "That Ramu he said come come baba we are all*

*Here, what for you want to grow old so far from your own Flesh and blood, your granddaughter. But I tell you. Better To have no granddaughter that one like this Geeta. (84-85)*

He is angry, not because the girl is obtuse, flippant, or defiant, but because, in coming to America at an impressionable age, she has subsequently begun to assimilate to its culture. She buys makeup and expensive care with "money she should save for her dowry" (89), With little concern over her future as a wife.

The character of Tilo exists as the ultimate representation of conquering oppression-in peeling away the layers of her given self, she aims at cultural liberation. However, this emancipation is burdened by risk- if successful; Tilo will regain herself physically, but lose her magic. If the spices consider her unworthy of freedom, she will be doomed to immediate death by shampati's fire.

In uncovering the “true” Tilo that lies beneath the trappings of the Old one’s magic, Divakaruni reveals the actual nature of female Indian immigrants in America. Her traversal is “a metaphor for a woman’s conflict between desire and duty”

Thus, to avoid vexation, Divakaruni offers a psychological analysis of Indian Immigrant women, as represented symbolically in Tilo, with emphasis on traditional mythology as transmitter of theme in literature. The author’s premise resides in the belief that Magic is there, and it’s a part of everyday life. This philosophy makes the novel, and the mystical transformation of its protagonist, both believable and meaningful.

In forming “a distinction... between the old and new Indian diasporas”, Sudesh Mishra, in his article, traces the history of Indian immigrant literature from its emergence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to present. He states “the girit enclave, the new diasporic writers are inclined to inhabit the liminal or threshold zone of intercutting subjectives that defines the experience of migrancy” (287). Not only the writing of Divakaruni embody the experience, but her contemporary, Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. “trace the split in the diasporic subject, expressed in the sense of being here and elsewhere, of being at home and abroad”

However, in joining mainstream America, she has a voice outside of her culture, even though she remains dominated by fear of discovery and rejection by her husband. It is the trepidation that torments her, but it is the knowledge of her other option, life on a reservation, that motivates and sustains the façade. Thus, her silence is both a burden and a liberator-if she reveals the truth to her husband she will be an outcast in two societies: if she remains silent, salvation through cultural acceptance is hers.

Tilo, wary of this unanticipated freedom and her lover’s acceptance of an average, Indian woman, Suggests, in a moment of insecurity, to halt their

relationship. Pessimistically, Tilo postulates, “don’t you see why it would never work? Each of us loving not the other but the exotic image of the other that we have fashioned out of our own lack”. To which Raven concedes, “Okay, may be my ideas about you and your people were wrong. let’s teach each other what we need to know. I promise to listen. And you-I know you’re good at listening already”

This conciliatory conversion holds within it a grand allegory-America, embodied in Raven, offers an apology for ignorance, for, in the past, turning a blind eye to cultural empathy. In perforating the metaphorical borders of exclusion to embrace love, Raven, as America, has discovered the powerful voice of the immigrant female. Ultimately, he promises to listen, to heed the cries of oppression and need in an extension of acceptance and benevolence. Tilo, as the feminine, immigrant archetype of the novel, is denounced as a figure who already knows how to listen. It is a skill she has perfected in silence: within the confines of cultural oppression she has been forcibly compelled to hear the voices of many, whereas now, as a metaphorically accepted member of American society, she may begin, like Divakaruni, to shape her own unique narrative.

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