



Research Paper

## Representation of Indian Diasporic Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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### ABSTRACT:

Women's independence and freedom is a subject that is stale yet effectively provokes discussions among our community. Huge number of women are still denied of their autonomous lives and respectful boundaries. Indian women often become instruments to enhance one's culture and plays the roles of carriers of tradition. They are bound by too many rules and restrictions that are usually justified in the name of traditions and religion. Their experience of these Indian value system is characterized by the patriarchal hegemony implied in our culture. However, Indian immigrant women are the victims of double subjugation. Already caught in between the cultural transition, from east to a liberating west, they must also fight off gender disparity and imposition of cultural values. As a South Asian Immigrant herself, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni often employs her narrative to represent the struggles of these women in her novels. Her well known novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) exhibits the identity crisis of Indian immigrant Tilo and her customers, as they undergo cultural displacement. With her brilliant use magical realism, Divakaruni also lends voice to her women characters in the novel, who represent the section of suppressed women of Indian household. This paper attempts to analyze the representation of women through the characters of Tilo and her Indian women immigrants, with reference to the Paul Mayeda Berge's movie adaptation of the same name. This comparative analysis gives a view on the struggles of Indian diasporic women. It concludes at the fact that Tilo's life as the mistress of the magical spices and of other major women character encompasses the reflection of hegemonized gender of Indian society.

**KEYWORDS:** diaspora, cultural displacement, patriarchal hegemony, identity crisis, patriarchal traditions, gender disparity

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Diasporic outlook encompasses not only the concerns of spatial displacement but also issues of gender disparity, particularly of diasporant women. Interestingly enough, Indian diaspora is reckoned to be the second-largest diaspora in the world, which also has much of a diversified global presence. Countries of modern times definitely acknowledge Indian diasporic women who are given much more inclusivity now, both in culture as well as economics. In fact, the professional fields of IT and healthcare comprise strong Indian diasporic participation. However, cultural prejudices and the patriarchal nature of the Indian society very well shaped the serious reality of Indian diasporic women, especially in the earlier periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women of the diaspora were assigned with the role play as the carrier of traditions and preservers of Indian identity. They were tended to be depicted as spouses, who are dependent, disinclined to migrate and of trifling labour value, or as lone personas of dubious virtue. Therefore, narratives become a powerful medium to comprehend women's experiences and to represent such social reality. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the vehement voices of Asian American immigrant women, who offer such powerful narratives for Indian diasporic representation. Divakaruni's choice of subjects evolves through the complex issues of immigrant lives, which she places against the normal American urban life. Divakaruni's works chiefly concerns with the struggles of immigrant women settling in an alien country with the dilemma of their new role. Her novels particularly, explore the feminine sensibility of immigrant lives, especially the psychological intricacies and development of the Indian immigrants. She pens women of diasporic sensibility, who are caught in between the two opposing worlds- one of liberating west and the other of richly traditional homeland. Nevertheless, they question the nature of the lives

conditioned for them and subjects their roles of mothers, wives, and daughters to thought provoking questions. This awareness urges them to rethink about their own lives as women and infuses in them, a sense of confidence and strength to fight against all the odds.

Her novels are mostly set in either India or United States, with her primary focus on the lives of South Asian women. As a South Asian immigrant herself, Divakaruni also draws in subject matters from her personal life, along with others. Her novels explore the social as well as psychological development of non-western, particularly Indian immigrants. One of the works in which Chitra Banerjee crafts the diasporic experiences is her 1997 novel *The Mistress of Spices*. It encompasses the narrative of a young woman Tilotamma (often called Tilo), who is designated as the mistress of magical spices. Though rich with power and control over others' lives, Tilo is bound by several restrictions, which discredits her desires and feelings. In a true sense, Tilo pays the price of her destiny of becoming the Mistress, with her personal freedom, in order to please the ever-living spices. Throughout the novel, Tilo is reminded of her submission to the needs and wants of the magical spices, and to submit her life to the needs of her customers. This hegemonic relationship, in which Tilo's life is determined by the spices, clearly indicates the power play in the patriarchal culture of India. Tilo's character and her sacrificial life in the land of Oakland could consider as a matter of study, in correspondence to the accustomed treatment of women in Indian society. In fact, Divakaruni's feminist sense in her novels could potentially bring out an entirely new aspect of studies, besides the diasporic outlook. Peppered with fine elements of magical realism, Divakaruni successfully brings out a sense of cultural displacement through the characters of Tilo and her various Indian immigrant customers. Through her protagonist and other women characters of the novel Divakaruni effectively brings in the representation of Indian household women. Along with the battles of diasporic issues, these women characters also deal with suppressive forces of patriarchal society. Each of them are mirror images of one or more challenges that Indian women faces, even extending to the issue of domestic abuse. As much as the novel addresses the lives of Indian immigrants, it also scrutinizes the persisting state of Indian women, irrespective of the society they live in.

## **II. ANALYSIS: TILO'S REPRESENTATION IN BOTH THE BOOK AND MOVIE**

Divakaruni, in her novel *The Mistress of Spices*, initiates a narrative of the young Indian woman Tilo, who after becoming the mistress of spices, immigrates to America, to serve the people there. Her life begins in one of the remote villages in India. Faintly aware of her unusual ability, she lives the life of an outcast (outcasted even by her parents), under her true identity of Nayan Tara. Little did she knew, that her supernatural ability would one day bring an unfortunate night to her village and take her to the island of spices. Her life with the First Mother of the island and among other mistresses of spices, takes her in an exploration of her own magical ability and she identifies her own calling; eventually gaining her new identity of Tilo. There, Tilo establishes, her deep and unmeasurable relation with spices, that bounds her to the duty of pleasing and submitting to the demands of these magical spices. She soon moves out of her comforting guidance of the island and immigrates to the strange land of America, in the city of Oakland. Tilo adorns the disguise of an old woman and binds herself to many rules, that is demanded of her 'mistress' identity. Despite the foreign land, Tilo's life centers on spices and shares a relationship where she's is denied a life of her own. Tilo becomes obliged to serve only the spices and the needful customers but within the given boundaries of regulations. She meets and helps many Indian immigrant families; instances where Divakaruni directs us to the diasporic sensibility she intends for us to experience. Tilo, along with her immigrant customers, is subjected to pangs of national existence and identity crisis. Nevertheless, with certain sacrifices of her own rights, the spices come to their aid. But again, soon Tilo's vow of abstaining from her worldly desires is put to test, with her encounter with another immigrant named Raven. Raven becomes the object of temptation to Tilo; coming in between spices and her sacrificial life for them. Driven by passion and her rebellious spirit of attaining what she as denied of, Tilo breaks away from all the vows she had made in *Shampati* fire; evoking the wrath of the spices.

Tilo is introduced in the image of every woman, who is seen merely as a dowry debt. Divakaruni, with her character of Tilo, creates an exact representation of women, who are bound to rules and restrictions throughout their entire lives. Being the mistress of spices, for Tilo comes with a price of freedom and normalcy which she aspires for. As a holder of this designation, Tilo is instructed to choose between the desires of her life and the power which is offered by the magical spices. But either way, Tilo would have to suffer abandonment. The very ability that gives her power over everyone else, demands a sacrifice of her. However, further analysis reveals the surprising resemblance between these rules imposed on the mistress of spices and other patriarchal conditions imposed on women. The rules subjected to Tilo include all the norms that maim women's independence. She is forbidden to share physical touch with anyone, to move out of the store regardless of any circumstances, to use spices for herself, or to even admire her own beauty. In all these regulations lies Divakaruni's implications to the taboo of independence, sexuality, and desire, that issues from the gender norms of Indian traditions. The first mother consistently warns Tilo about the impending consequences of displeasing spices if she chooses to follow her natural urges.

The spices represent much more than mere plant substances in this novel; it encompasses a clear representation of Indian patriarchal society that dictates conventional rules for women. For Tilo, the spices, just like the Indian society, become an identity to be pleased and sacrificed for. Tilo is trained to give up her entire self and sacrifice the desires of her heart for their demands. This paradoxical power play between Tilo and her spices brings the major irony of the entire novel. Her supernatural power offered by the spices themselves, alleviate her to a position of superiority among her fellow beings; allowing her to control and heal their lives. However, she's not autonomous of her own life. This very own ability denies her independence and freedom; the most important gifts that she even offers to her clients.

Tilo also depicts the image of every family woman of Indian social structure, who's expected to know all and everything about the needs of the people surrounding her. And with the fact that how closely Tilo's spice shop creates an impression of Indianness, readers can conclude about Divakaruni's attempts at highlighting the Indian households, that imbibes their deep-rooted traditional system, irrespective of the country they live in.

Divakaruni also undertakes the issues of women through the portrayal of other characters like Lalita and Geeta. Lalita, or more particularly known as Ahuja's wife, clearly reflects the case of suppression and abuse, that is normalized in the Indian traditional system. She is a young woman who is confined merely to her husband's identity, rather than her own. Tilo describes her as a "soft beauty", on whose face there are evident signs of pain and failing marriage. Tilo often sees Lalita holding up a "jar of mango *achar*" or a "packet of *papads*", in a "hesitant wanting" only to keep it back. Here, Divakaruni draws in the picture of a typical Indian woman who is made to suppress even her simplest wants. This very act indicates the derailing state of her marriage to Mr. Ahuja, who is identified in the novel as a drunkard and as an abuser to his wife. Tilo, in her encounter with Lalitha, finds instances when Lalita's suppressed dream of becoming a successful tailor surfaces her mind; especially when Lalita finds a beautifully stitched cloth in Tilo's spice store. Lalita again is a scapegoat to the typical Indian urge of marrying the girl off to the "most suitable boy, living in *phoren*, earning American dollars" (Divakaruni, 15). With Tilo's supernatural ability to read minds, both the readers as well as the protagonist does find traces of marital rape and abuse in Lalita's marriage. Tilo recognizes Lalitha's desire to have a baby, as a solution to all her problems, even to the physical abuse she's subjected to every night. The irony of this instance arises when, Tilo identifies that Lalitha is a prisoner of her own thoughts, while Tilo herself occupies the same position. Despite the differences in their state and personality, both are the victims of the conditioned minds of patriarchal society. While Lalitha remains as a prisoner of her problematic marriage, Tilo tries to remain and accept the burden of pleasing the spices, by denying herself all her wants.

The character of Geeta is another excellent character portrayal by Divakaruni in this novel. She is depicted as a young Indian immigrant, who is involved in the American urban life and wishes to marry a Mexican native named Juan. The relationship between Geeta and her family is a reflection of the typical Indian familial relations that is mostly dictated by traditions rather than love and harmony. Geeta, being brought up in a modern country, with modern thoughts follows the choices and styles of *firingi* women, as described by her grandfather. Her lifestyle in urban America includes all of the things that Indian culture abstains women from. She is often found fault with her practice of working late at night in the office with other men or for wearing too much make-up. Geeta's grandfather, in fact, is an archetype of the cultural clash and personifies the traditional values that is often imposed on Indian women, in spite of the fact that some of them live in another country. However, Geeta's parents are no less representatives of Indian hypocrisy. They seem to be faux advocates of modern and liberal thoughts, who agrees to their daughter's free choice of leading an American life in certain things, but denies the same acceptance when it comes to her choice, in the major aspect of choosing a foreigner as a life partner. Geeta's decision of marrying her Mexican lover Juan doesn't sit well with her parents, any more than her grandfather. Their outlooks are laced with paradox; as the readers see Geeta's parents, especially her father Ramu, wholeheartedly accepting each aspect and decision except this important one. Initially, Geeta's parents create an impression of modern parents who understands and acknowledges the independence of their daughter. However, this distorted image crumbles down, surprising both Geeta as well as the readers, when the crisis of choosing Geeta's groom arises in the family.

Geeta's character can also be placed in contrast to Lalitha's character; unlike whom she fights back against the imposition of rules. While Lalitha painstakingly fulfills all the obligations of a typical Indian wife, Geeta refuses to conform to all such regulations. She breaks away from her own people, as they attempt to inflict patriarchal traditions on her. In this sense, Geeta chooses her own desire and happiness, rather than to please her family or society. As much as Geeta's character contrasts with other suppressed characters, she also becomes a reflection of Tilo's helplessness. Tilo finds her own pain and suffering of loving Raven in Geeta's circumstances. Knowing her own passion for Raven is unattainable, Tilo sets out to ease Geeta's struggling love and urges her grandfather to go easy on her desire to marry the person she loves.

The movie adaptation of the novel by Paul Mayeda Berges on 2005 creates quite a distant impression in both the characterization and narrative. Unlike the novel, the characters of the movie are served with a blatant nature, that removes them from their originality. Almost all of the characters in the movie, come with a

predetermined but 'flat-sketched' characterization; while the novel successfully created rich characters with all the humane subtleties. This distinction is evidently shown in the depiction, of the most dynamic character Tilo. In the movie, Tilo takes up the image of young woman, who isn't necessarily disguised as an old woman as in the novel. This in fact deprives Tilo's subtlety in her character, that is caused by her constant urge to look good and young. One of the major aspects in the novel that draws readers to Tilo is the identity crisis that she is put in throughout the plot, as a result of the diasporic sensibility. In various stages of her life, Tilo is given more than one identity which finally culminates in the name of Maya, as she reunites with Raven. However, Paul Mayeda Berges fails to inculcate this very basic theme of identity crisis, in his movie. In the movie, Tilo only carries the name and identity of the "mistress".

The movie also brings about certain changes in both the characters as well as the event concerning them. Berges depicts Tilo as a woman who, even from the beginning has a strong inclination to find the love of her life, despite it being forbidden. For Tilo, in the movie, love with Doug (portrayed as Raven in the novel) happens at first sight. Rather than presenting their growth of relationship through their soul-binding conversation, the movie mostly presents Tilo looking out through the window at Doug. Berges introduces few new characters that are not seen in the novel. He introduced the character of Mayisha, as the lover of Kwesi, who is not mentioned in the novel. She is portrayed as a young woman, to whom Tilo comes to aid, with the spice saffron, that helps in the matters of love. Through such instances, Tilo's character portrayal is presented differently than in the novel. Divakaruni artistically pens Tilo as a complex character, who is identified by her rebellious yet humane nature. Unexpected to her supernatural gifts, Tilo is depicted rather as a human being who is not simply invincible, but who also possess certain weaknesses. Despite her magical strengths, Tilo is depicted as someone conscious of her own disguise as an old woman and strongly craves companionship, well aware of its improbability. But as one comes to the analysis of the movie, Berges eliminates all these characteristics, and simply presents Tilo as a person who merely is associated with spices and her love for Doug. Thus, unlike Divakaruni, Berges denies the representation of an ordinary Indian woman, through his depiction of Tilo. The only frailty that Tilo, in the movie, showcases is the jealousy and the inner conflict she feels when Doug's girlfriend comes to her store, seeking a solution to improve her love life.

Nevertheless, Berges successfully presents Tilo's rebellious spirit in the movie. As much as the novel highlights her strong nature, the movie achieves a similar scale of depiction. just like in the novel, Tilo's defiant nature is successfully conveyed in her attempts and decisions to save her customers from the wrath of the spices. She's even determined to break free from all the regulations put on her and decides to step out of the store or pursue the desires of her heart. Tilo, in her most rebellious step, even gives way to her love for Doug and spends a night with him; thus breaking the most sacred vow of a mistress. Her devotion to spices is well displayed in both the book as well as in the novel. the commitment and the trustworthiness that she had established with the spices brilliantly comes into the light in the instances when Tilo is tortured with her inner conflict, or when she feels the pangs of regret as she moves into the *Shampati* fire. Despite all these considerations, Berges fails to bring in the striking elements of Divakaruni's novel- both in the characterization and in the impact that it should have been offered. Thus, the movie is mostly centered on the passionate love story between the characters, rather than conveying the diasporic or feminist sensibility that Divakaruni reflected in her work.

Just as he tried to introduce new characters in his adaptation, Berges had also eliminated certain prime characters from the novel. The character of Lalitha is one of the impactful characters in the novel, through whom Divakaruni had effectively represented the subjugated life of Indian women. It was through Lalith's story that Divakaruni had undertaken the depiction of Indian household women, who within the four walls of their "security" could also be the victims of domestic abuse and marital rape. Unfortunately, Berges fails to bring in the story of Lalitha and the relevant senses behind it, in his movie. And this fact becomes unacceptable considering the importance of such representation holds in present times and yet it was omitted In the movie.

However, Berges does create space in his movie to include the story of Geeta who, similar to the text, signifies women who are not willing to be suppressed by the conditions and norms of the Indian patriarchal society. He religiously follows the details of cultural and patriarchal conflicts between Geeta and her family as portrayed in the novel. Thus, Berges effectively brings in the persisting concerns of women's independence and presents Geeta's family as an emblematic reflection of traditional Indian values.

### **III. CONFLICT BETWEEN LOVE AND FAMILY**

One of the significant aspects that both the novel as well as the movie address is the theme of conflict between love and family. It is one among the many obstacles that are thrown at women by the patriarchal society- especially one that is characterized by its strict adherence to traditional values. This closely resembles how Indian society functions when it comes to women's freedom and independence. Indian women are still kept away from the basic rights of choosing their way of life, especially in the matters of choosing one's own life partner. The Mistress of Spices draws our attention to this crucial crisis, through the characters of Tilo and Geeta. Both of them are made to come across dual choices, from which they must choose one over the other.

Geeta's life becomes the exact reflection of most Indian women, who are forced to choose either their family or love. Her misery and pain of having to make a choice mirrors the state of every Indian woman who are put in a similar crisis. Geeta's story proves the insistent idea that women's freedom of choice is still a taboo for Indian society. However, Tilo's dilemma is shown to be more complex, since it is either her destiny or her love for the 'Lonely American' Tilo's cost of choosing her desired life with Raven (Doug in the movie) goes well beyond her life, to her customers' who are adversely affected by the wrath of spices. Along with the sacrifice of her destiny and life, Tilo is plagued by the guilt of causing dangerous consequences to her Indian clients. Both these cases illustrates women's independence in their decisions as something that is to be punished for. Thus, both the movie and the text put forth the question that why must women always be subjected to making such painful choices, rather than having both.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with her usual brilliance gives us a perfect view on the intricacies in the lives of South Asian immigrant women, based on their feminist as well as their diasporic senses. The entire story dwells on the cultural displacement experienced by Indian immigrants, who are caught in the issue of identity crisis. The characters are distinguished by their troubles of cultural clash, which results from their experience of multiculturalism. Though Divakaruni tries to enhance the Indianness through the spices and Tilo's store, the pitiful state of immigrants caught in the cultural transition between east and west, doesn't escape the attention of the readers. The novel also calls readers attention to gender issues, pertaining to women's independence and freedom. Divakaruni legitimately portrays the women in the novel as the clear victims of toxic patriarchal values ingrained in Indian traditions. In spite of the liberation that American society could possibly offer them, these characters are bound to the gendered power structure implied in Indian culture. Through the character depiction of Tilo and others Divakaruni successfully conveys the negotiation that takes place in the cultural alteration of these women, while also battling out traditional and suppressive values. Paul Mayeda Berges, in his recreation of the plot into a movie, had tried to bring in its true narrative through his characterization and style. However, his attempts remains unsuccessful in bringing justice to some of the characters and their stories. Nevertheless, Berges offers his audience a visual contribution of much appreciative value.

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