



Indian Culture And Tradition In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress Of Spices"

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Abstract

This paper "Indian Culture and tradition in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices" attempts to analyse culture and traditions as a core theme of the novel. This novel explores Indian culture and tradition through the lens of spices, food, and the immigrant experiences. The novel is based on the idea that spices have magical powers and can heal the body and soul. The spices are personified and each chapter is named after a spice, which represents the spice's unique functions and how it's special to Tilo. Spices are also a representation of Indian culture and can evoke a sense of home for Indians living in America. Food is a way to express and define culture and tradition in the novel. The novel depicts Indian food as authentic and uses magical elements to represent it. The novel depicts the cultural conflict and trauma faced by Indian immigrants in America. The characters' struggle to find their identity in a new land, but eventually embrace a transformed identity. The protagonist, Tilo is a metaphor for the young Asian woman caught between tradition and modernity and try to balances the both.

Keywords: Culture, tradition, Food, Spices, Conflict, Hybridity, Identity,

Food and Clothing:

Food plays an integral part in the cultural expression within the novel. Traditional Indian dishes such as rice, dal (lentils), roti (flatbread), and various curries are part of daily life, representing comfort and connection to heritage. Dishes like biryani, dosa, and sweets like gulab jamun or rasgulla are sometimes mentioned, evoking sensory experiences tied to home and family. Sharing meals, especially during festivals or family gatherings, is an important cultural practice. The act of cooking and preparing food, particularly by women in the family, is often linked with care, love, and nurturing. Food also becomes a metaphor for family bonding, identity, and the complexities of cultural preservation. As the part of fusion of cultures, the characters navigate life in both India and the U.S., the blending of traditional Indian food with American influences (like fast food or Western-style cooking) also reflects the cross-cultural experiences of the characters.

Indian clothing is a prominent feature in the novel. Characters are often depicted wearing sarees, salwar kameez, and other traditional outfits, with the details of the clothing reflecting the character's personality and their cultural background. For example, sarees, which come in various fabrics like cotton, silk, or chiffon, are often symbolic of elegance and cultural heritage. The choices of colours, designs, and how a saree is worn can also signify a character's social status and emotional state. As some of the characters, particularly in the later generations, move to the U.S., they are shown adopting more Westernized clothing, which contrasts with their traditional Indian wear, highlighting the cultural transitions they undergo.

Spices as Symbolism of Indian Tradition:

Spices are not only the central motif in the novel but also symbolize the rich culinary, medicinal, and spiritual heritage of India. The protagonist, Tilo, is a "Mistress of Spices," a woman who has the power to use spices to heal, protect, and transform people's lives. Spices, in Indian culture, have a long-standing association with food, medicine, rituals, and even mythology. Each spice in the novel corresponds to specific qualities or energies, which reflect the values and customs of traditional Indian knowledge systems, especially Ayurveda, the ancient practice of natural healing. Following lines in the novel highlights the status of spices.

Vanilla beans soaked soft in goat's milk and rubbed on the wrist-bone can guard against the evil eye. And here another: A measure of pepper at the foot of the bed, shaped into a crescent, cures you of nightmare. (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* 4)

Here are some spices which are used as part of medicine, spirituality, culture and mythology. **Turmeric** is used for purification and healing, symbolic of the traditional Indian emphasis on physical and spiritual cleansing. Here Divakaruni is stating the importance of Turmeric in terms of medication and spirituality.

Turmeric which is also named halud, meaning yellow, colour of daybreak and conch-shell sound. Turmeric the preserver, keeping food safe in a land of heat and hunger. Turmeric the auspicious spice, placed on the heads of newborns for luck, sprinkled over the coconuts at pujas, rubbed into the borders of wedding saris. (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* 13)

Cinnamon is associated with love and protection, linking to the importance of relationships and family ties in Indian society. **Cumin and coriander** symbolize strength and endurance, which reflect the resilience often required in the face of challenges in Indian life.

Indian Spirituality:

Hinduism and the reverence for goddesses (especially Durga) form a backdrop to the narrative. The act of visiting temples, seeking blessings, and the importance of rituals are subtle yet significant in the novel, representing the spiritual aspect of Indian life.

The novel integrates elements of Indian spirituality, particularly concepts like karma, fate, and the importance of balancing the material and spiritual worlds. Tilo, as the Mistress, is not only a healer but also a spiritual guide, practicing meditation and living a life of asceticism. Her actions are deeply influenced by her understanding of dharma (righteousness) and her desire to help others while adhering to the ancient rules that govern her mystical role.

You are turmeric, shield for heart's sorrow, anointment for death, hope for rebirth.
(Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* 13,14)

The spiritual traditions of India, such as the influence of Hinduism, are visible throughout the novel. Tilo's interactions with her customers in the spice shop, for instance, are often laced with philosophical musings about fate and destiny, mirroring the belief that individuals must confront their pasts and reconcile their desires with their duties.

Immigrant Experience and Cultural Identity:

The novel also addresses the immigrant experience, particularly the experience of Indian women who live in the diaspora. Tilo runs her spice shop in the U.S., and much of the story revolves around her interactions with her customers—mainly South Asian immigrants who come to her for guidance. The experience of living between two cultures—Indian and American—creates a tension that is both personal and collective. While the novel showcases the rich, vibrant traditions of India, it also highlights the challenges of holding onto one's cultural heritage in a foreign land.

The characters in the novel struggle with balancing their traditional Indian values with the demands of living in a more individualistic, materialistic society. This clash of cultures is a central theme in the narrative, reflecting the broader experience of many Indian immigrants who must negotiate their identities in a new and often alien environment.

Indian culture places a strong emphasis on family and community, and this is reflected in the relationships between the characters in *Mistress of Spices*. Tilo's interactions with her customers often reveal the complexities of family dynamics, particularly in immigrant families, where there may be generational divides or clashes between traditional values and modern ways of life. The novel explores how community ties, family expectations, and personal desires intersect, especially within the Indian diaspora.

Mythological and Folkloric Elements:

Indian culture is rich in mythology, and the novel draws on various myths and folktales to underscore the spiritual and cultural framework that guides Tilo's actions. For example, Tilo's training as the Mistress of Spices is itself rooted in ancient Indian mystical traditions, which often involve the transmission of knowledge through oral stories, symbolic practices, and initiation rites.

Additionally, the mystical powers attributed to Tilo can be seen as a nod to Indian folklore, where ordinary people are sometimes endowed with extraordinary abilities. These elements add an air of magical realism to the novel, blending the everyday and the supernatural, which is a common feature in Indian storytelling. Here is importance of turmeric in the mythological way;

I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the divas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between. (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* 13)

Festivals and Rituals:

The reverence for goddesses, especially Durga, is prominent in the novel. Durga Puja, an important festival in many parts of India, is a celebration that brings together communities to honour the goddess Durga. The rituals, prayers, and festivities associated with the festival highlight the religious and cultural importance of the divine feminine in the characters' lives. Indian rituals and festivals are depicted through the interactions and ceremonies described in the book. This includes the celebration of festivals like Diwali and the significance of traditional rites Hindu religious practices, such as the use of sacred chants and the importance of puja (worship rituals), are integrated into the story. Tilo's role as a spice mistress involves performing rituals that reflect Hindu spiritual practices.

Role of Women in Indian Society:

The novel explores the role of women through the figure of Tilo, who embodies a complex blend of power and restriction. As a Mistress of Spices, she is tasked with maintaining a strict code of conduct, sacrificing her personal desires to serve others. This reflects traditional gender roles in Indian society, where women often find themselves confined by cultural expectations, whether through arranged marriages, familial duties, or social obligations. Yet, Tilo's journey also speaks to the ways in which women can transcend these limitations and reclaim their own autonomy, echoing the evolving role of women in modern India.

Additionally, Tilo's relationship with the other characters shows how women navigate the tension between tradition and modernity, as many characters in the novel are immigrants trying to balance their Indian heritage with their lives in the West. This is particularly visible in the character of Tilo, whose role as a spiritual figure connects her to an older, more traditional view of womanhood, while her inner turmoil speaks to the personal and cultural challenges of living between two worlds. The novel explores traditional family structures, the role of women, and the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, all of which are central to Indian culture. The importance of family honour, duty, and sacrifice are also recurring themes.

In conclusion, *Before We Visit the Goddess* is deeply imbued with Indian cultural elements, and the traditions, clothing, and food are integral to understanding the characters' emotional landscapes, their relationships, and the choices they make. These aspects not only enrich the narrative but also serve as metaphors for identity, belonging, and the challenges of reconciling the old and new worlds. The Mistress of Spices is a rich exploration of Indian culture and tradition, using spices as a metaphor for the wisdom, rituals, and history that are an integral part of Indian life. The novel also examines the impact of migration, the preservation of cultural practices, and the challenge of navigating multiple identities in a globalized world. Through its portrayal of Indian customs, spiritual beliefs, and the immigrant experience, the book offers a deep, evocative reflection on the complexities of identity and belonging. The novel is deeply steeped in Indian customs, beliefs, and practices, particularly those that involve spirituality, food, family, and identity.

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Cinematic Text

The Mistress of Spices. Dir. Paul Mayeda Berges. Screenplay. Gurinder Chadha. Perf. Aishwarya Rai, Dylan McDermott and Anupam Kher. Entertainment Film, 2005.