

# CO-EXISTING REALITIES: A REVIEW OF INDIA IN CHITRA DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

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## Abstract

India has long been a cradle of spiritual wisdom and cultural heritage, significantly contributing to the development of world literature. Indian-English novelists often focus on the blend of contrasting cultures and values between India and America amidst their cultural clashes. The interaction between these cultures at social, cultural, and political levels is explored from various perspectives. A harmonious multicultural society requires cooperation, tolerance, and mutual respect, allowing different cultural groups to coexist while preserving their unique traits. Chitra Divakaruni addresses the multicultural, political, psychological, and religious aspects of her country, examining the challenges and effects of multiculturalism. Her novels, including "THE MISTRESS OF SPICES," illustrate the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, creating a productive synergy. This paper explores the coexistence of Indian and American multicultural values as depicted in "THE MISTRESS OF SPICES," a novel deeply rooted in Indian traditions. Divakaruni combines myth, magic, and ancient culture with contemporary elements, effectively capturing the immigrant experience and exploring themes of love and identity.

## Paper Identification



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## Introduction

Social thinkers recognize culture and tradition as integral components of society. India's ability to modernize while preserving its cultural heritage has significantly enriched its milieu. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reflects this uniqueness in her writing, establishing herself as a prominent voice in the Indian-American literary diaspora. Her bestseller, "THE MISTRESS OF SPICES," weaves Indian supernatural traditions, folktales, and myths into its narrative, achieving immediate success in 1997. Divakaruni describes her work as an attempt to create a modern fable by blending the realistic world of twentieth-century America with the timeless world of myth and magic (Rajan). Dr. D. B. Gavani noted that "THE MISTRESS OF SPICES" employs the technique of Magic Realism, presenting the immigrant experience

against a backdrop of myth, magic, and romance. Divakaruni's writing effectively portrays the South Asian experience, highlighting the richness of Indian culture and spices and their role in resolving the problems faced by the Indian diaspora (Gavani).

The essence of Indianness is central to the novel, as Divakaruni explores the immigrant experience. She creates a reality that synergizes Eastern and Western cultures. "*THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*" is a tale of joy, sorrow, human conditions, and the magical powers of one special woman. It focuses on the Indian American community, bridging the realistic and mythical worlds.

The story follows Tilottama (Tilo), the "spice of nourishment" (sesame), who runs a grocery store in Oakland, California, disguised as an old woman. Tilo uses the secret magical powers of spices to heal the local Indian community, addressing their alienation and homesickness. The novel explores themes of immigrant struggle and experience, including identity, social, cultural, geographical, political, and spiritual moorings in a new and alien land. Divakaruni successfully blends the exotic, mythical, magical, and fantasy elements of the East with the reality of the modern multicultural world, realistically portraying the cultural predicaments faced by immigrant Indians. She emphasizes how immigrants maintain their homeland beliefs and traditions in conflict with those of their new country. By revisiting her Indian identity, Divakaruni highlights the adaptability of Indian culture, enabling a marginalized society in a foreign land to come to terms with modern existence.

In her fictional world, Divakaruni illustrates that the twilight of "here" and "there" hinders the process of achieving "wholeness." As noted, "Space and Time take on a complex significance because they are not fixed dimensions. There is an interplay between the memory of 'there' and the time of 'here'" (Yocum 222). Through Tilo's journey into time and space, Divakaruni presents a multi-dimensional perspective on an

existence that is neither entirely Indian nor American but exists midway, carrying endless potential for evolution.

Arul Renuga (2015) in her Ph.D. thesis rightly states that:

Magic realism as manipulated in Chitra Banerjee proves to be a suitable literary mode to convey the tensions that exist between disparate cultures and different perceptions of reality. It is significant the way in which the magic realist narrative works by interweaving the supernatural with ordinary daily events. It also reflects in the language of narration the encounter of two cultures and two opposing perceptions of reality. The novel *Mistress of Spices* concludes with a synthesis of culture on the protagonist's terms (171).

It is crucial to explore an alternative discourse to understand the challenges of bridging the cultural divide. This can be studied and explained here by integrating the immigrant experience with Indian history, myth, and culture, aiming to synergize the cultures of India and America. This paper seeks to create a third space to negotiate alternate realities.

"*THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*" incorporates elements of fantasy and powerful poetry, reviving ancient Indian folklore and traditional myths. In Indian beliefs, spices, beyond their culinary uses, possess magical properties to cure physical and spiritual ailments. These spices can be dangerous if not used carefully, governed by divine laws that even Tilo, the spice mistress, cannot break without severe consequences. Tilo can only pray for the release of their magical powers, as the ultimate power to heal and restore well-being lies within the spices themselves. Lavina Dhingra observes:

While America is stereotypically urban, swathed in neon-lit billboards signaling risk, sexuality, and freedom, India is portrayed as eternal, mystical, and mysterious,

and symbolized by its ancient Hindu religiosity and spicy cuisine. Hence, in Divakaruni's American fable *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*, the protagonist finds her vocation as a spiritual and psychological healer of American and immigrant ailments, selling exotic Indian spices including 'Turmeric,' 'Fenugreek,' 'Asafetida,' 'Fennel,' 'Neem'...the novel combines Hindu myths, fables and superstitions with critiques of contemporary American social problems including racial tension, ethnic identity conflicts, assimilation, teenage drugs and gangs, forbidden intercultural romances, abusive or broken marriages, and spiritual emptiness among materially affluent but emotionally poor Indian immigrants" (31).

The store and its spices were considered more significant than the mistresses themselves. Each chapter of the book is uniquely named after a spice, deeply intertwining with the characters and their emotions. In the Spice Bazaar, a myriad of faces each tells a story, but the most distinct are Geeta, Lalita, Haroun, and Raven, whose fates are closely linked to Tilo's. Divakaruni presents her characters in their full complexity, both their strengths and weaknesses, physical and psychological, stating, "The characters in the book are metaphorical. But they are also realistic, very human. They exist on both levels at once" (Marcus).

The importance of family in Indian culture is evident in Geeta's story, where Tilo sees a reflection of herself and her forbidden love, described as "India and America all mixed together into a new melody" (Divakaruni 90). Respect for family members, including parents and grandparents, is paramount, often requiring personal sacrifice. This theme is highlighted through the Banerjee family's generational clash: Indian-born parents trying to arrange a marriage for their westernized daughter, Geeta, who rebels by

announcing her intention to marry a Chicano, Juan Cordero. Despite moving in with her friend Diana, Geeta avoids actions that might hurt her parents, maintaining her Indian upbringing and values. She embodies a blend of traditional Indian and contemporary values. "I didn't move in with Juan. I couldn't do that to Mom and Dad. Besides, I knew it would be really bad for our relationship, what with me being so stressed and everything" (136).

The conflict intensifies with Geeta's grandfather, who tries to instill outdated values from India, which are irrelevant in both the foreign context and modern India. The family conflict resolves only when Tilo intervenes with her spices, bringing about a transformation in Geeta's grandfather. He realizes, "It is easy to plant a thorn in the heart, not so easy to pluck it out" (178). He understands the need to adapt to changing times, contemplating, "It's the elder people's job to forgive the younger,... I have been thinking, what if she does marry this Mexican boy, it is not so bad, times are changing, other people's children have done similar" (177). The 'thorn of hate' is removed, leading to a family reunion where both older and younger members show flexibility, blending the best of both the old and new cultural values.

An immigrant plunges into the present new world. An immigrant undergoes an important change in the process. The so called assimilation involved in immigration, however, does not mean a denial of the past, which is an impossibility. It probably means giving up a rigid hold of the past. It is a recognition of duality or... a recognition of 'fluid identity'. (Abraham 58)

Divakaruni revives Indian ethos to present an alternative discourse, creating a harmonious blend of Eastern and Western cultures. "*THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*," set against a backdrop of myth, magic, and romance, critiques patriarchal structures and offers a lens to re-evaluate the sacrifices of Indian women.



Lalita, embodying Indian womanhood, reflects the deep-rooted cultural influence and the recurring pattern of a male-dominated society.

The novel highlights aspects of Indian culture where parents arrange marriages for their children, and decisions in matrimonial alliances are primarily the 'prerogative' of the boy and his family, often disregarding the girl's happiness. In this system, unmarried adult daughters become a source of worry and tension for their parents, due to the social and moral responsibility of marrying off their daughters. This tension affects the daughters as well, who are expected to stay at home until married, with marriage prioritized over career. Such circumstances make women vulnerable to marital violence, oppression, and total subjugation to patriarchy.

Lalita represents the traditional woman whose culture prevents her from discussing her pain, confines her work within the four walls of the house, disregards her happiness, and treats her as a mere body.

In many parts of our country women are still considered to be a burdensome appendage. Indian social scientists reveal an organized pattern of discrimination against women. Their revelations are startling. Myth and history too reveal a record of violence against women. (Hatimi 198)

However, Tilo saved Lalita not through traditional healing but by giving her a newspaper clipping with the address of an emergency shelter for women, empowering her to face her dilemmas. Lalita then finds strength, thinking, "I deserve dignity, I deserve happiness" (Divakaruni 272). Divakaruni's works, like those of her South Asian contemporaries, articulate the deepest fears and traumas faced by women both in India and abroad, often showcasing their transformation into stronger, self-reliant individuals (Kamath). Her female characters evolve and reconcile with their shifting immigrant identities and experiences.

Divakaruni blends the immigrant experience with Indian history, myth, and culture to create a synergy between India and America. Her realistic depiction covers a wide range of immigrant life in America. Haroun's story highlights the struggles of immigrants who dream of success in America but often arrive as illegal aliens. Many from the third world are captivated by the American dream, believing it promises a bright future and freedom from racial and cultural inhibitions. They undertake perilous journeys, abandoning social, cultural, and moral obligations in their home countries to seek their destiny in a new land. Immigrants from various backgrounds merge into a new cultural convergence, promoting a unique culture. Haroun, dreaming of wealth and happiness in America, finds Tilo to be an "architect of the immigrant dream" (Divakaruni 29). Though his path was fraught with danger, Haroun's fortune seemed to improve. Divakaruni's novel, rich with mystery, suspense, and realism, maintains an optimistic outlook even in dire circumstances, reflecting a fundamental aspect of Indian life.

Divakaruni's stories often reappropriate Indian mythology to weave compelling narratives about women bridging cultural divides. Her female protagonists struggle with cultural dislocation but find joy in everyday life. They aspire to break free, live independently, and exhibit a bravery that many women fear to embrace. Tilo's multiple names throughout the novel symbolize her complex identity crisis in a foreign land, helping her locate herself in her adopted culture and ultimately defining her selfhood. As Abou states, "Before the individual can reconcile her sense of self with her experience, she must navigate the contradictory Indian and American social expectations. This cultural conflict, though paradoxical, is a prelude to forming a synthesized cultural identity" (Abou).

Tilo adopts the name Maya, meaning spell or enchantment in Hindi, embodying desire, pain, joy, and illusion. "One that spans my land and yours, India

and America, for I belong to both now” (Divakaruni 316). Tilo becomes a carrier of both cultures, akin to Paul Gilroy's observation that “Cultural commodities travel swiftly, crossing geographical boundaries to create new, vibrant forms” (Gilroy 187–198). Tilo’s new identity reflects a healthy blend of East and West, making her a role model in the emerging diaspora culture.

Reviving lost Indian culture in a new environment is a recurring theme in Divakaruni’s work. “Chitra writes to unite people by destroying myths and stereotypes” (ukessays). She breaks down barriers between people of different backgrounds, communities, and worlds (Kirsznner & Mandell 377). India is depicted as a land of magic and exoticism, captivating characters like Raven, who sees Tilo’s exotic image as more authentic and magical (Divakaruni 290).

In her quest for community in diverse American society, Divakaruni suggests a mosaic metaphor, not a melting pot, as the best way to build a vibrant, tolerant, and diverse country. Tilo and Raven, both special with legacies of power, find in each other the support they need. Tilo’s journey mirrors the myth of Shampati, a bird from The Ramayana, symbolizing rebirth and transformation. By the end, both Tilo and Raven evolve, finding strength and selflessness in their relationship (Divakaruni 309).

Divakaruni accurately captures the diasporic experience, blending Eastern values with Western ethos (Grace 125). Her writing fictionalizes the Indian woman’s struggle with multiple roles in an alien world. Tilo’s development to an autonomous person, rooted in her Indian heritage, exemplifies this blend. Divakaruni’s positive portrayal of her female protagonists, who prevail with self-knowledge, contrasts with Western materialism and escapism. Tilo’s rejection of Raven’s fantasy-based paradise emphasizes the importance of engaging with the real world (Divakaruni 315).

Divakaruni believes in perpetual transition, where cultural and literary boundaries are constantly shifting. She embodies a ‘new internationalism,’ blending ancient culture with immigrant realities (Mangla). Tilo’s realization of the need for a ‘Third space’ underscores the creation of a new cultural identity, where immigrants and natives alike grow through interchange and experience (Rath).

In "*THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*," the re-visioning and relocation of Indian culture is central. It’s not just a retelling of history but an attempt to create a space where fantasies and realities coexist, contributing to the dissemination of Indian images, myths, and culture.

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