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## **Diasporic Identity formation via Film adaptation of Chitra Banerjee's The Mistress of spices; Food as a transcultural Metaphor**

Kishor Kunal Kashyap  
Research Scholar, Dept. English, Patliputra University, Patna  
Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida  
Email: [kunalkashyapgbu@gmail.com](mailto:kunalkashyapgbu@gmail.com)

Sonika  
Research Scholar & T.A. (Teaching Assistant)  
Dept of English,  
Sharda University  
Greater Noida

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### **ABSTRACT**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an eminent award-winning author and poet. She unites people and does this by destroying myths and stereotypes, breaking down barriers and dissolving boundaries between people of different backgrounds and communities. She writes about the abuse and courage of immigrant women. She shows the experience of struggle involved in immigrant people trying to find their own identity. Tilo, a magical figure who runs a grocery store and uses spices to help the customer overcome difficulties, also provides spices not only for cooking but also for homesickness and alienation. Tilo is an allegory for all of them-for the immigrant Indian community who bend the rules of their homeland to adjust to their new home. This research paper shall be divided into two sections: the first will be the analyses of portraying India as constructed in the cinematic adaptation of the same, and the second will be the critical study of the representation of the Indian diaspora through spices. The paper also explores the circumstances of East and West, where the views can coexist.

*Keywords: diasporic identity, locality and food history, Film adaptation, spices, symbolism, food practice.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Mistress of Spices (2005), the cinematic adaptation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel of the same name, is about fascinating spices. Whereas Divakaruni's first intact work posits spices as an empowering mode for an Indian public in America in the film, they are handled as self-orientalising tools. I did not aspire to criticise the film on the standard of its being an untrue transmutation of the fictional plot. I am focused on seeing how it deals with the question of cultural disagreement as portrayed in the text. My main variance in this paper



is that the novel puts forward deep-rooted multiculturalism. At the same time, its cinematic representation is absorbed with present spices, which illustrate India and the Indian immigrant populace. I shall also examine the diasporic identity construction through food via film adaptation.

Anita Mannur in her popular work, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, opines that food, as a central part of the cultural imagination of diasporic populations, becomes one of the most viable and valuable sites from which to inquire into the richly layered texture of how race is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena, both to affirm and resist notions of home and belonging. Nearly all South Asian diasporic writers include references to the native food of the immigrants. Food is an inherent part of their indigenous culture and one feature of their culture that they can positively carry with them to the new host land. It is thus an essential part of diasporic identity. Several South Asian diasporic writers have started focusing on food as one of the main transcultural metaphors in their works.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diasporic writer who anecdotes the immigrant Indian experience in the United States. *The Mistress of Spices* is her second work of fiction, in which she addresses the themes of cultural issues, alienation and assimilation faced by the Indian immigrant community in the United States. She makes use of the magical realist style to make a statement on racism in multi-ethnic America. She furnished magical effects to spices, an everyday, mundane commodity largely imported from India. The protagonist, Tilo, is the owner of a spice store in San Francisco who, over the course of the novel, reveals herself to be a healer performing magic through spices. Divakaruni's collection of works involves the current novel, which enlists her as a representative woman of the South Asian diasporic community in the U.S. Gurinder Chadha, an artist, film-maker, and scriptwriter from the same community (Indian diaspora), expressing similar concerns related to migration. She has a fascinating composition of movies dealing with the diasporic Indian experience wherein she represents the behaviours of being a Non-Resident Indian. Broadly, she follows the custom of the East created within and recognised by the West, hardly corrupting these stereotypes. In the film under conversation, Chadha has produced a beautiful, interracial love story at variance with the multicultural, cosmopolitan surroundings of America. However, in doing so, the director Mayeda and the scriptwriter Chadha ignore



the religious and political sides of the original text by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Many painful problems, similar as racial discrimination and corelated issues faced by the Indian immigrant community in the U.S., which are strongly highlighted in the text, are rarely featured in the film. The film adaptation is a significant work of art residencies in the gap of not only two major cultures but also two representative cinematic genres—Hollywood and Bollywood independently. It investigates the changing interrelation of a community vis-à-vis its land of birth and its land of agreement. Theorizing South Asian diasporic cinema, Jigna Desai properly points out that this genre produces new identities, closing to both the source country and the immigrant place. She justifies those South Asian diasporic films function significantly as part of the shifting economic, political, and cultural relations between global capitalism and the postcolonial nation-state, raising questions regarding the negotiation of cultural politics of diasporas located within local, national, and transnational processes. The film adaptation does present this major aspect, as it scrutinises the cultural politics tempting the Indian immigrant community, though not as extreme as the novel. This paper embarks to analyse and thereby conclude that while the film adaptation is the movie maker's" personal and political choice not only regarding the novel but also about immigrant identity, the film occasionally emerged to be totally disassociated from its primary text. While the novel is filled with magical realist elements, the film disregards most of them. The film-makers decided to highlight a love story, which brought together and amalgamate the East-West cultural differences while completely compromising the corrupt reality of immigrant life that was depicted in the novel. The Mistress of Spices, a story of eastern mysticism and attracting magic realism, is told by Tilo, a young Indian woman restricted in the body of an old woman and skilled in the mysterious powers of spices. Her exceptional expertise and entrenched knowledge of the healing powers of spices lands her in Oakland, California, where she uses it to help the local Indian community by opening a spice shop from which she manages spices as remedial. Tilo can read people's hearts and minds, but it is a power that holds only when she keeps herself at a distance, "not too far nor too near, in calm kindness poised.(Divakaruni, 55) Nevertheless, Tilo is powerless to keep herself at a distance, as she gets enlarging excitedly entwined with her clients as they struggle to fulfil the requirements of their families, the age-old encounter of the East and the West, the unfeeling cruelty of racism, insulting husbands - all of the intricacy of living in the contemporary world. Tilo was exclusively supposed to serve the requirements of the Indian people. Yet, in a turn of



circumstances that would ultimately change the direction of her life and transform her in several ways, Tilo finds herself falling in love with an American guy named Raven and gradually giving in to her previously unmet needs and newly discovered untamed emotions. Her complicated and intense connections with her clients and Raven cause her to stray outside the bounds of her spice mistress vows, and she becomes embroiled in a turbulent conflict between the powers of the immortal and the ups and downs of real-world existence. As previously stated, the cinematic adaptation diverges from the original literary text. Divakaruni depicts the spice shop as an ancient and decaying in order to contrast it with the glitz of "new land America," which "prides itself on being no older than a heartbeat." (Divakaruni, 4). Yet the spice shop in the movie seems more like a culture boutique, with gleaming interiors and chic ethnic fashions. The richness of the images is a common theme among movie critics. The film is described as "a one-dimensional, somewhat nonsensical picture, but it is unquestionably good-looking" in The New York Times review. Former Miss World Aishwarya Rai is a Bollywood celebrity, and her photography frequently has the aesthetic appeal of a tempting food magazine arrangement. (Gates, 15). The spices have a very alluring appearance, and the colourful arrangement is likely to catch onlookers' attention. Nevertheless, because of this airy and exotic representation, the spectator in the movie becomes unfamiliar with and removed from the commonplace spices. Such a glossy depiction of the spices in the film adaptation surely undermines the magical qualities that Divakaruni bestows upon them. Tilo is a vibrant, vivacious, opinionated, and incredibly brave woman, and her tale will go on forever. According to Stanley Fish, "strong multiculturalism" is defined as "the politics of difference." It is powerful because it regards diversity as something that exists in and of itself rather than as a symptom of something more fundamentally constitutive. While the boutique multiculturalists will appreciate cultures just superficially. " (Fish, 378). This is the main distinction that will grab our attention as we compare the novel and the movie. The literature makes a real and careful attempt to portray diversity, but the movie fancifully supports it through a few isolated events. The goal of the movie's cosmetic display of Indian culture is to enthrall and seduce spectators throughout the world with its exotic splendour and elegance. In contrast to the many chapters of the novel, the movie seldom strives to challenge Western perceptions of the East. The issues facing newcomers in an unfamiliar country are bravely presented and addressed in the book. The issues with racial prejudice as they are presented in the book are conveniently ignored in the



movie since they could be too much of a shock for the Western viewers that the movie is trying to appease. Since Veena's husband is Indian, two American adolescents choose to physically abuse him and subject him to bullying merely because he is a foreigner. Eventually, the attorneys demonstrate that the filthy Indian was the one who began the fight and that the Americans were simply acting in self-defence. These themes are not addressed in the movie, which falls short of honouring the novel's careful treatment of the myriad challenges facing immigrants.

Tamara S Wagner suggests that writer often use “food metaphors” as an attempt at self-orientalism -Food metaphors are among the most vexing clichés of postcolonial and diasporic fiction” (Wagner, 31). The metaphorical and symbolic depiction of the spices in the narrative contributes to its magic realism, which is exceptional and unmatched. In the novel, spices are portrayed as possessing contradictory properties such as those of healing and punishment, creation and destruction, beautifying and deformity, embalming, and the ability to cause agony. They are given various powers by Divakaruni, which they can use according to the circumstance. Spices and the magic realism they represent are utilised as emblems of the weapons the oppressed need to fight the hegemony of the West. The novel's Spice Bazaar may be viewed as a multicultural bazaar that gives a minority that is culturally marginalised a chance to spread its culture and traditions. As the Mistress of Spices, Tilo connects America's fast-food cosmopolitan culture with India's traditional culinary techniques. In the postcolonial age, spices emerged as an Indian method of creating a multicultural environment that resists Western consumerism. The use of magic realism is virtually missing in the movie, and spices are shown as being magical and exotic but weak. Spices are shown in the movie with vivid colours and glitter but without any of the meanings or the subversive potency the author gave them. As portrayed by Divakaruni, Tilo's spice shop is constantly bustling with customers. As the "architect of the American dream" (Divakaruni, 28), Tilo employs the mystical powers of the spices to relieve her clients' suffering. The picture, however, pitifully ignores the riot of colour contributed by the customers of the spice shop. So, the film comes off as a flimsy interracial love tale. Any element that would divert the audience's focus from the glitter of the heroine or the intensity of the love narrative is deliberately avoided throughout the movie. This is the main distinction between the novel and the movie. The film just supports diversity, but the literature passionately promotes it. We contend that only someone with a thorough understanding of other cultures can create a sophisticated narrative like

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Divakaruni's novel. However, the film is, at its best, a superficial cultural carnival. In order to attract viewers from the first world, Indian culture is presented superficially, but the original text makes little use of such cultural eulogies. The cultural struggle that the protagonists experience in the book is not simply addressed, but it goes without saying that the movie shows how readily cultural differences may be handled.

On the one hand, spices are plainly "mastered" by a woman who just happens to be named "Mistress," giving off a colonial "master-slave" flavour. The contradictory implication is that the "Mistress" is not the Mistress, but a slave to the spices, who simultaneously rule over her. The spices undermine the traditional master-slave relationship, and finally they gain control. According to the First Mother, spices stand for tradition. Knowledge is passed down by tradition from one generation to the next. This knowledge includes the use of spices for medical and magical purposes. The predominant educational philosophy on the Spice Island is really based on the archetypal gurukul—the traditional Indian school. Students methodically get the guru's information. Although the holy orality of the Indian tradition is kept (as the knowledge of spices is transmitted orally), the Indian gurukul's paradigm is somewhat flipped in that both the guru who imparts the knowledge and the pupils are all female.

The audience cannot hear Spices' continual chat with the Mistress. Spices, being a material embodiment of tradition, are resistant to change as well. Spices are as inflexible as the monolithic traditions to which they belong. Yet, following in the footsteps of their Mistress, the spices soften slightly throughout the narrative. The film depicts a gleaming reconciliation of spices and the new world order. However, the literature opposes such a seamless merger of East and West. We shall dwell on the ramifications of the movie's modified conclusion later. However, we want to emphasise that spices represented the Orient not just in colonial discourse but also in the postcolonial, cosmopolitan world. And it is here that the film and the literature appear to converge. Here, it is important to emphasise how the film limits both the power and reach of magic. Although mysterious, not all spices are equally potent. In the book, the spices trigger an earthquake by shaking tectonic plates as a karma retribution for racial hate. However, in the movie, the earthquake serves as a means of resolution through which the spices experience a change of heart and learn to embrace the human side of their Mistress. In the book, Tilo is devoid of spices, but in the movie, she maintains her glitzy



control over her spice business. The glossy promotion of the Indian community in America is the film's objective.

Now, I want to draw attention to how the novel's and the movie's conclusions vary. The one is far more hopeful that the old value system may survive peacefully with the Western capitalist cult. In contrast, the latter, as we noted before, does not see the prospect of an easy commingling of cultures. In the story, the spices create the earthquake, which destroys the material world that America takes such delight in. Yet, it promotes "brand India" in Hollywood, with Aishwarya's sari serving as one of the flavourful elements. India is presented to American and British audiences on a silver platter. They are likely to recognise similar Spice Bazaars in their neighbourhood after seeing the movie and accept their existence as a component of their own, more extensive, international culture. Hence, while being a simplified adaptation of the book, the movie emphasises spices. This motif gives the Indian diaspora group authority. Chadha and Berges use the complex metaphor of spices to illustrate the intersection of their ethnic culture and popular culture in a new civilisation. The diasporic groups look to their home countries for such empowering symbols; hence, Chadha's display of Indian culture and spices is an honest attempt to reassert her identity as an Indian diaspora. Tilo ceases to be a Mistress at the end of the novel, although she remains one in the movie. As a result, spices continue to provide Tilo the ability to cure the immigrant population in the United States, and the Mistress herself ceases to be a native-born citizen. Her only tool for improving her and her people's life and making America her home is spices. The movie by Chadha and Berges maintains its own ideology—that of the easy fusion of the East with the West—despite watering down the cultural clash depicted in Divakaruni's novel and engaging in superficial exoticism.

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