



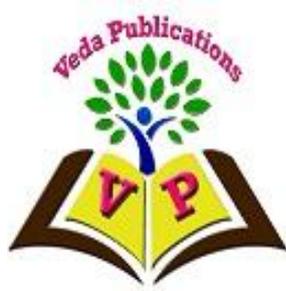
TRANSCULTURAL JOURNEYS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE *MISTRESS OF SPICES* AND *OLEANDER GIRL*

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ABSTRACT

The modern globalised world has witnessed the blurring of boundaries between diverse nationalities and cultures, as there is a heightened interaction between people of different geographical locations due to increased technological advancements and migrations. Every individual in today's multicultural world is exposed to many different cultures, which have a profound effect on their identities. Among the various freedoms that people enjoy today, they have the freedom to choose their cultural affiliations. When people travel from one nationality to another they often undertake a journey to discover themselves. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an acclaimed diasporic author, has delineated the lives of immigrants, their joys and sorrows, their feelings of alienation and discrimination as they acculturate. Her literary oeuvre clearly reveals her stance at the interface of different cultures. This paper analyses the transcultural journeys that the protagonists of *The Mistress of Spices* and *Oleander Girl* take to discover themselves.

Keywords: *Transculturalism, Cross-Cultural encounters, Identity, Cultural Intermingling, Transcultural Journey.*

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The term “transcultural” was coined in the year 1940, but it has gained relevance in the modern interconnected world, and is now emerging in various fields of literary studies, films, theatre, architecture, music and anthropology. Transculturalism takes a step ahead of the traditional theories of Multiculturalism and Interculturalism, as it transcends the constraints of the conventional conception of culture. It is characterized by cross cultural associations, fusions and convolution leading to the formulation of a novel cosmopolitan culture. Transculturalism transcends cultural borders and emphasises the unification of varied cultures; it acts as a unifying force of cultural diversity, which not only brings together, different cultures but also creates a new common culture. Instead of emphasising the differences between cultures, transculturalism brings out the similarities and the common aspects that cultures share.

The repercussion of globalisation is conspicuously visible in contemporary literary writings, with the rise of a new body of transcultural authors who no longer delimitate their creativity to their ethnic backgrounds, but take the readers in an intrepid journey to different countries and nationalities, thus creating a wider reading audience.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a transcultural author who has etched a prominent place for herself in literature, by creating works that span both Indian and American cultures.

As an acclaimed diasporic author, Divakaruni has delineated the lives of immigrants, their joys and sorrows, the alienation and discrimination that they face and the way they acculturate. The literary oeuvre of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, clearly reveals her stance at the interface of different cultures. She has outstandingly coalesced her Indian cultural heritage with her immigrant experience and given a higher perspective of life in her writings. This paper analyses the transcultural journeys that the protagonists of *The Mistress of Spices* and *Oleander Girl* take to discover themselves.

The Mistress of Spices (1997) was Divakaruni's debut novel, which depicted the life of the protagonist Tilo, along with a myriad of multicultural characters. Tilo is an ageless wise woman, who has magical power over the spices; she

runs an Indian spice store in California. Several immigrants frequent her store, to buy Indian grocery and to get remedies for the afflictions of an immigrant life. Tilo uses the magical power of the spices to aid the immigrants in assimilating in America. The novel depicts how people of diverse culture come together and are able to overlook their differences and find commonalities among them that leads to transcending cultural boundaries.

The author has perceptibly characterised the multicultural aspect of modern America by delineating characters from varied nationalities. The customers who come to her store are not only Indians, but are from varied cultural backgrounds. The awareness that people of diverse nationalities and cultures share a common humanity is the basis of building a transcultural identity. There are several aspects that are universal to all cultures; they form a part of our human nature. It is universal to have emotions, to eat, drink, sleep, love, to express anger, dissatisfaction; the love of arts, music, dance, these are all human aspects common to all cultures. It is universal to eat food, but how we eat or what we eat differentiates us from the others.

The society and cultural heritage into which an individual is born plays a major role in forming one's identity. Tilo was born in an immensely poor Indian household, which considered girl child a financial burden. But Tilo, was blessed with mystic gift of foreseeing the future and revealing hidden mysteries. Her gifts took her to places, and she undertakes her journey from one identity to another. She was born as Nayantara, her mystic gift brought her fame that spread wide across and made the pirates come for her, she is named *Bhagyawati* by them. The sea serpents who rescue her call her the *Sarpkanya*. In the island she is called, *Tillotamma*, after the spice *Til* or sesame, the spice of nourishment. Towards the end of the novel we see a new transcultural identity for her, Maya, a name that spans both America and India, as she now belongs to both. All her previous identities, with different names were formed by the circumstances in which she was placed, though the society into which we are born and the cultural values that one is exposed to plays a role in forming one's identity, but it often is a given identity, and not one that is formed by the person.



A transcultural person will always be willing to cross cultural boundaries and accept the nuances of another culture. It is very easy to form friendships and bonds with people of the same culture; however it needs efforts to cross cultural barriers and form cross cultural friendships. Tilo meets people of different cultures in her shop, it is not only Indians who come to her stores, but we see a multicultural crowd that frequents her store. She shares Indian recipes with Kwesi, an African American. She falls in love with Raven, the Native American. Tilo is seen making friends with those who are from different cultures. When the mail woman brings a letter for Tilo, she gives her a bag of raisins saying it's a gift from her country India. The mail woman returns her kindness by giving Tilo a pack of chewing gum. These simple acts of kindness create bonds of friendship between people of diverse cultures and leads to transcultural friendships as people are willing to overlook the differences, and build on the common cultural aspects that they have.

The conflict that Tilo faces is to choose between a life of magical powers and a normal life. As a mistress she has to follow many rules, she is forbidden to leave the store, to look at her own reflection, to touch any mortal, she is also forbidden to use the spices for her own desires. Tilo adheres to these laws laid by the Old One in the island. But things begin to change when she meets Raven. Tilo has to decide whether she wants to live a secluded life in the four walls of her store or to cross the barriers and have a free life. Transculturalism is all about crossing boundaries and having a global vision of the world, instead of dwelling on the things that are familiar to us. Tilo decides to undertake this journey and embrace life with everything it has to offer.

Transculturalism demands that individuals have a globalised vision of the world. Cultural conflicts occur when people are preoccupied with their own culture and consider their cultural traditions and customs remarkable than the others, this also leads to disregard for others cultures. Towards the end of the novel we see Tilo, going back to her city, where people are suffering in order to help them. She is seen as a selfless woman who forgoes her comfort to help others.

Tilo is inclined to embrace new cultures; she is keen to learn about Raven's cultural heritage. Even though she is a traditional Indian woman, she acknowledges the modern woman and appreciates her for all her efforts; she calls Geeta "India and America all mixed together into a new melody" (87). Tilo is willing to experiment with new cultural changes and endorses other cultures. She puts up the advertisement for Kwesi Dojo classes in her store, even though all the advertisements in the Indian store are about Indian films or Indian products.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee unveils the journey that the protagonist undertakes from being Nayantara to becoming Maya at the end of the novel. Tilo decides to give up her powers to have love in her life, she offers herself up to the power of spices, to punish her for using them to attain outstanding beauty for one night that she spends with Raven. The spices forgive her and give her another life, but she is not the extraordinarily beautiful woman anymore, nor the old woman of the stores with wrinkles, she now has a new body, only her eyes remain the same. Tilo for the first time chooses a name and an identity for herself. She wants to be called Maya, as it is a name that is common to both Indians and Americans, as she is now both. She is a transcultural person, having the characteristics of both Indian and American cultures.

Oleander Girl (2013) unveils the life of the young seventeen year old Korobi Roy, born to an Indian mother, Anu Roy and African American father, Robin Lacey. Korobi is unaware of her mixed parentage; she is raised in a traditional Bengali culture. It was only after her grandfather's sudden death, that her grandmother, Sarojini unveiled the long hidden truth to Korobi.

The Oleander Girl is a coming of age novel, which describes the life of the protagonist Korobi, a young girl brought up in the safe confines of her family, who takes the resolute decision to go California in search of her father. During the journey she meets all kinds of people, some considerate, some malicious, yet these experiences help her in becoming a strong and adept individual. Korobi hails from an affluent traditional Bengali family. Korobi's identity was directly associated to her family. One of the things that charmed her fiancé Rajat, about



Korobi was her background, "Old Bengal through and through...Khandaani, something with heft, something you can never buy your way into" (66). Korobi always felt that there is more to her identity than what she is aware of. She tells Rajat, "All the things I'm proud of, my family, my heritage - they are only half true. The other half of me - I don't know anything about" (66). Korobi shows immense audacity when she decided that she even wants to find her father; she was willing to call off her engagement if her In-laws had a problem with her past.

It was a shock to Korobi as well as for her family to know that her father was not an American as they presumed, but he was an African-American. Even worse was finding that Korobi's parents were never married, she was born out of the wedlock, which is absolutely unacceptable in the Indian society.

Korobi's journey to California to find her father was a transcultural journey that she undertakes; to not only locate her father but also to determine her true identity that was an amalgam of the East and the West. Transcultural journeys lead to transformations, as one is exposed to new cultural scenarios from which they can take new life lessons. It is necessary that one observes carefully the nuances of social behaviour of the new place and try to establish cordial relationships with others, which begins with the simple step of communication. Korobi is seen acculturating and adopting the ways of new land. While immigrants acculturate and learn new things, they also unlearn some things of their previous culture. The generousities and courtesies that they follow in their homeland are often given up by them, because in the new land their only aim is survival. Korobi can sense these changes in her, the day she reaches America, she says "Already I'm losing my Indian courtesies; I'm thinking in terms of survival, like an immigrant (94). There is a change in her mannerisms as well as she calls Rajat 'baby' a term she had never used before, which makes Rajat think "it's been only a few days. How did she pick up that American endearment"(131).

During her stay in California Korobi meets Vic, who falls in love with her. Her love for her fiancé Rajat is put to test as she feels strongly infatuated to Vic, now she has to decide whether she wants to stay in America or to go back to India, she realises that

she can "become a new Korobi" (218) in America. Vic tells her how she can find her own identity in the following words, "You need to look away from someone else's past into your own future. You think if you learn who your father and mother were, it'll teach you who you are? But you are someone already. You'd see if you weren't so busy focusing elsewhere" (217).

Korobi's identity was closely linked to her family. In America, Korobi decides to take control of her life and make her own decisions. When she ran out of funds to look for her father, she decides to cut her long hair and sell it for money, she knew that her "hair belonged to Bimal and Sarojini's granddaughter, to Rajat's fiancée to Papa and MamanBoses' daughter-in-law to-be" (178). She finally does something that proves that she has right over her own life and can take decisions for herself.

In the end Korobi decides that she wants to live her life where she was brought up; like Sudha in the *Vine of Desire 2002*), she comes back to India. Rajat's family were not able to accept the fact that Korobi's father is an African American, and that her parents were never married. She now wants to succeed in life without her in-laws help. She contacted the Principal of her college to pursue her further studies. Sarojini marvels at her as she hears Korobi speak on phone to her Principal; she is neither abject nor overly confident, "the girl Sarojini left at the airport could never have imagined it"(276). The transcultural journey that she undertook has brought a substantial change in her; she is a new person now; she frees herself from the shackles of family reputation and pride, and starts thinking for herself. She finds her own identity and works towards making a life for her in spite of all the hardships that come her way. Korobi's character is transcultural as she has the elements of both Indian and Western culture. In the words of Richard Slimbach, "Our willingness to transcend the boundaries of our inherited identity opens up to the good, the true, and the beautiful in each person and cultural tradition" (224). The transcultural journey brings out the hidden aspects of an individual's character and allows them to add global values to their own character, and fully develop their potential identities.



Thus the journeys that Tilo and Korobi undertake by crossing cultural boundaries help them to redefine themselves. The author proves through these transcultural novels, that the amalgam of diverse cultures leads to a creative process that bring up new cultural values. Both the protagonist have coalesced the Indian and American values and enriched their identities while retaining their Indian sensibility.

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