

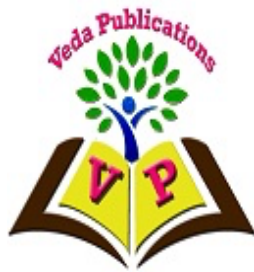
**CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND DIASPORA IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S NOVELS *MISTRESS OF SPICES* AND *QUEEN OF DREAMS***

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ABSTRACT

Delving into the concept of cultural assimilation stood as a major theme for an acclaimed Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The novels such as *Mistress of Spices*, and *The Queen of Dreams* remained at the forefront of describing the concepts of cultural hybridity and diaspora. The life journey of Tilo, her connection to homeland of India and adoption of cultural traits in United States stood as the contextual basis for the novel. *The Queen of Dreams* is a novel where the intersection of Indian heritage and American culture is visible. The novel manages to outline the reconciliations and tensions arising from the main character Rakhi as she tries to navigate between the two worlds.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Cultural hybridity, Post-colonisation*

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INTRODUCTION

The novels published by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni hold an ample degree of contribution in the domain of cultural hybridity and diaspora. Two novels remain as the core objective of discussion in the current study. These are *Mistress of Spices*, and *The Queen of Dreams*. *Mistress of Spices* included a comparison of cultures and transformation of individuals based on the sense of belongingness, culture, and transformation as an immigrant.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Cultural hybridity in postcolonial literature

The blending and merging of multiple cultural identities forges the concept of cultural hybridity. This is the product of colonization or migration in most cases and is recognized to be a complex process. The idea or concept of cultural hybridity is complex because of the mixture of the wide array of cultural traits to form a new and hybrid identity (Yousfi, 81). The manifestation of cultural hybridity is done via character, and narrative structures. A fertile ground for exploring cultural hybridity stands to be the experiences of colonized people, and immigrants as they suffer from the act of balancing different cultures. The power dynamics and post-colonial studies have helped discover that the hybridity is a product of colonial domination as the colonized get forced to follow the directions of the colonizer's culture. On the other end, there stands resistance in following the cultural values as prescribed by the colonizers. It is because the colonizer's culture is often modified to create unique interpretations of the culture, thereby making hybridity a form of cultural agency. A sense of fluidity, and dynamic nature of the

identities is brought under the influence of cultural hybridity.

1.2 Diaspora and the immigrant experience

Diaspora highlights the trajectory of a population after it is dispersed from the homeland and tries to figure out the displacements in an attempt to connect back to the origins and seek shelter in the new country. Several variables such as migration, belonging, identity, and negotiation of the different cultural values are covered within diaspora (Bhandari 101). The postcolonial, migration, and global literature have addressed the diaspora concept by connecting it with the cultural hybridity and dual identity. "Third Space" in postcolonial theory tries to state that there is an interdependence between the elements such as diaspora, migration, and cultural hybridity. Third space is supposed to be the area where the cultures meet, clash, and combine in an attempt to form new cultural identity for an individual. The diasporic experience is dependent on the level of cultural negotiation as those that manage to have better negotiation face optimised diaspora experience. The theory by Stuart Hall in reference to the construction of identity elaborates the continuous evolvement of individuals across various setting to form new identities (Colpani 222). As per this concept, identity is not a fixed element as past experiences, cultural heritage, and current experiences shapes the identity of an individual. The combined values from different cultures allows the ultimate diaspora experience as it bridges the gap shared by the homeland and home country culture. Apart from this, displacement, and generational conflict are major part of diaspora. For instance, the physical displacement is less concerning for an individual as compared to the emotional

displacement. It is because under physical displacement, an individual visits the home country and leaves the homeland, but shares the emotional attachment with the homeland culture and traditions.

2. ANALYSIS OF MISTRESS OF SPICES

The novel relied on the idea of explaining Tilo to be the Mistress of Spices as she held ancient knowledge about spices which resemble magical properties. The Indian roots of Tilo outline that her core identity is shaped by the teachers back in India. However, she faces the challenge of withstanding the pressure of the Californian community in United States as she slowly tries to tag along with the surroundings. The power dynamics is visible in many ways in the culture of United States as Tilo had to accept hybrid identity in an attempt to adapt the varied set of social norms, behaviours, and values. The microcosm in this case stood to be the spice shop owned by her (Beg 230). The shop gave the platform to connect with people from different background while making sure that the connection to the Indian roots is maintained. One of the famous quotes from the novel remain as "I am the Mistress of Spices. I know what the spices do. But the spices, I do not know what they want." Therefore, the deep-rooted knowledge about the traditions and culture held by Tilo is constantly under the pressure of change as she has to deal with the social norms established in the state of California. This is suggestive of the fact that there lies a lot of tension between the ancestral knowledge and the new life in diaspora underscores the process of blending in the new culture as there is a rush to negotiate. The novel manages to address that Tilo faces a state of conflict as she bonds with an Indian-American man named Ravi. However, for Ravi,

the case is not that complicated as there is presence of Indian heritage and American societal values to highlight a neatly managed cultural hybridity. Through the process of interacting with such a man, Tilo slowly discovers the value of finding an inclusive version of herself.

The novel manages to promote the idea of diaspora in a major manner as the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States is featured. The psychological, cultural, and emotional tensions were vividly brought to life in the novel. The process of accepting a new culture while keeping the homeland culture makes cultural fragmentation acceptance easier. However, in the novel, Tilo did not blend well with the Western culture (Sharma). This resulted in the sense of cultural fragmentation living strongly in the psychology of Tilo. The novel manages to outline that "In this land, I will be forced to learn the ways of their lives, to hold in my heart the love and pain and bitterness of all the women who have passed before me." This is indicative of the fact that Tilo is under immense pressure to carry the role of an immigrant as well as a cultural guardian. The quote is a reflection of the psychological, and emotional burden faced by her in the host country. The spices here act as a catalyst to keep a balance between the two different cultures and allow Tilo to be expressive with her actions while not forgetting her roots and mixing with current state. This helps strengthen the means of survival in the diaspora.

3. ANALYSIS OF QUEEN OF DREAMS

Rakhi plays the role of a protagonist in the novel. The central character of the novel manages to embody the notion of cultural hybridity. The American lifestyle and Indian heritage became the backbone of

the character in the novel. This allowed to discover the various facets of cultural hybridity and highlight the impact cultural influences had on the character. The American identity gave the scope to access a modern lifestyle and helped invest in the societal values present in America (Sali 192). However, Rakhi stood firm on the idea of not following the footsteps of her mother in the initial stages as it made no sense to indulge in the spiritual believes. "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Referring to this specific quote allows to address the internal struggles faced by Rakhi to cope with the Indian heritage, especially the structured Indian values maintained by her mother Rakhi. The traditional values preferred by her mother became challenging for Rakhi to follow as the Indian values deemed to be foreign. There is a major sense of disconnection in the case of Rakhi as she neither feels at home by either the American culture or the Indian one. As the novel explored the character of Rakhi further, it became evident that the individual has now started to value the motherly roots. This helped the character to build the confidence, and courage to celebrate both cultures and find balance with them. Therefore, cultural hybridity is a theme where an individual gradually identifies the need for connecting with different cultures and submerging in those varied cultural values to form a balanced lifestyle.

Diaspora and the immigrant experience is better analysed from the novel when the spotlight is given on the character of Padma. The immigrant experience is represented by Padma as she moved from India to United States. The physical displacement as part of the diaspora theme have not managed to erase the memories of her homeland and the

traditional values sought deeply by her. The diaspora experience becomes more visible as the character works her way to complement the traits from the homeland with that of the home country. For instance, interpreting dreams could be identified as one such area where Padma shined. This aids in the process of recollecting the past memories, and cultural values while exploring the complexities of the home country (Karas 112). The novel further manages to outline the challenges of belonging to explain diaspora vividly. It is prominent from the relationship shared by Padma's daughter Rakhi with her as Rakhi deals with the burden of managing generational divide. This generational divide correlates with the immigrant experience because Rakhi does not feel connected to the Indian cultural roots like her mother, and thereby mirroring the experiences of unnumbered immigrants and their children. A specific quote from the novel tries to explain the diaspora identity. The quote stands as "Sometimes, I think the world is made of these moments, not solid, but woven, delicate, and intricate." There is a fragile and multifaceted nature of the diaspora identity because of the mixture of the moments collected from both homeland and host country. The journey of self-discovery of Rakhi indicated the ways by which individuals in diaspora try to reconcile the tensions between the homeland and their current host nation.

In The Queen of Dreams, the themes cultural hybridity and diaspora intersect as the journey of Rakhi towards self-discovery, and her simultaneous attempts to reconcile the dual identities marked the influence of these themes. The hybrid experience is backed by the character of Rakhi in the novel as her mother Padma embodied the diaspora figure. The

emotional growth of Rakhi is dependent on the embracement of both cultures for Rakhi. The certification of following both cultures marked the dual identity of the character at the end of novel. The resolution of the immigrant generational divide was also symbolised by the dual identity formed by Rakhi. Apart from this, there is never a fixed or static state of diaspora as it constantly evolves under the influence of interactions of past and present.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Mistress of Spices and The Queen of Dreams, both of these novels have managed to address the core themes such as diaspora, and cultural hybridity. The acceptance for a new culture while also keeping the values and believes of the homeland makes an individual capable of balancing the diaspora identity. In both novels, this stood as a major theme as the main characters developed their new identity to value cultural hybridity. Rakhi in The Queen of Dreams tries to reduce the conflict with her mother as she faces emotional distance. While for Tilo in Mistress of Spices, the isolation of being in the middle of two cultures which is a common for diaspora individuals stood as the central theme. In case of Tilo, the forced cultural inputs remained larger as compared to Rakhi.

CONCLUSION

The cultural hybridity and diaspora are complementary factors which helps review the dynamics of cultural identity and transformation of individuals. Creation of a hybrid identity and ensuring lesser cultural fragmentation stands to be a wise choice for the individuals who feel pressurised to cope with host country cultural values. The Queen of Dreams and Mistress of Spices have collectively

inferred cultural hybridity and diaspora to be interrelated as several common factors are affected by them such as displacement, identity negotiation, sense of belonging, and migration.

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