

Acculturation: A study of Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract:

A group of people's beliefs, habits, traditions, way of life, and behaviours are what make up their culture. Culture is defined as the set of these characteristics. It profoundly affects people's mental processes and establishes the basis for each person's uniqueness and sense of self. When a person relocates, he or she must either voluntarily, unavoidably, or forcibly become adjusted to the new culture. Acculturation is the process of becoming accustomed to a new environment's local culture. Migration, immigration, relocation, or displacement all contribute to acculturation. It is capable of being both one and two sided. However, in order for the non-natives who make up the minority group to live and survive, they must get assimilated into the majority culture of the region.

The goal of the current research study is to explore, with reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*, the conundrum, challenges, and stress that Indian immigrants in America confront as they struggle to manage both cultures. Being an Indian who has made his home in the United States and having first-hand experience with immigration, the author poignantly explores the nuances of acculturation via a variety of characters in the story. The author explores the idea of freedom and free will through the protagonist Tilo. She also explores how Indian tradition and American modernity collide, as well as the subsequent modifications that tradition goes through to allow for Tilo's flawless integration into American society.

Key words: *Acculturation, immigration, culture, identity, freedom, free will*

Introduction:

The term "culture" refers to the patterns of human conduct that include a wide range of social conventions, values, and morals as well as aesthetics and other forms of expression. It affects residents' opinions, judgements, and choices in a specific location. It is a set of common values that is transmitted from one generation to the next. According to English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor, "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (1971's Primitive Culture).

There are regional differences in culture. Different traditions and customs that are accepted in one society are not accepted in another. Additionally, it varies in terms of religion, caste, race, and period. A person's identity is shaped by their culture. Thus, according to Geert Hofstede, "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes members of one category of people from members of another."

The nature of culture is change. It varies occasionally to meet the needs of the moment. When people from various cultures interact closely, it changes, influencing both cultures. It becomes essential for people to adjust to the local culture when they relocate to a new location. Acculturation refers to the process of adjusting to a new culture. According to Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936), acculturation is "the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other" (p. 146). It is a process in which non-native people attempt to make the required adjustments to their way of life in order to integrate themselves into the country they have settled while maintaining the fundamental morals, ethics, and values of their home country. They work to achieve a balance between the two worlds—one for their existence and the other for their sense of self and uniqueness.

For a variety of reasons, including education, employment, recreation, etc., people relocate to new locations. One of the main causes of acculturation is immigration. Here, people move to new areas of their own free will in order to make a life. Other social and political issues include migration, displacement, and relocation, in which individuals are compelled to move for a variety of reasons. However, in both situations, the non-native people will need to change to fit the local culture for their own good. Acculturation can be

one-sided or two-sided, but the native population is influenced by outsiders at a relatively slow rate.

The concept of acculturation is central to Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's book *The Mistress of Spices* and to the protagonist's development as a person. Tilo, a young lady who transforms into an eternal mistress of spices and is assigned to Oakland, California, to carry out her tasks, is the focus of the story.

The process of adjusting to a new culture and incorporating its values, beliefs, and customs into one's own identity is referred to as acculturation. Tilo, an Indian immigrant, must navigate the cultural differences between her native country and her adopted country as she struggles to acclimatise.

The conflict between traditional Indian ideals and Western society is one illustration of acculturation in the book. Tilo struggles to balance her strong ethnic customs with her wish to blend in with her new environment. She must balance finding her own identity in American society with navigating the expectations that are placed on her as a traditional Indian woman.

Her process of acculturation is further complicated by Tilo's position as a mistress of spices. She is a mystical being with the ability to employ spices to heal people. She is, however, constrained by rigid guidelines that control how she deals with others. Her mission is to assist others while keeping impartial and avoiding developing personal relationships. This conflict between responsibility and personal aspirations is a reflection of the difficulties immigrants encounter when juggling the expectations of their new country with their cultural background.

Tilo gradually starts to acclimatise to her new environment throughout the book. She starts connecting with her clients, developing relationships with them, and even taking the chance of going outside the restrictions of her magical abilities. She gradually challenges conventional conventions, which emphasises her process of acculturation and how she has incorporated new values into her identity.

Tilo is simultaneously dealing with the effects of acculturation. She starts to lose her own abilities and identity as she becomes more engaged in the lives of her clients. The risk of

losing one's roots and distinctive identity is the price of completely assimilating into a new culture, and this loss symbolises that cost.

Acculturation in The Mistress of Spices:

Through the experiences of the main character, Tilo, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's book "The Mistress of Spices" addresses the issue of acculturation.

Acculturation is the process of absorbing the cultural norms and values of a different group, typically as a result of contact and interaction. A young woman with magical abilities named Tilo is brought to Oakland, California, where she works as a store's Mistress of Spices, assisting customers in selecting the ideal spices for their requirements. Tilo herself goes through a process of acculturation through her interactions with a wide variety of consumers.

The conflict between Tilo's traditional Indian identity and the liberal American culture she experiences in Oakland is one example of acculturation in the book. Tilo maintains strong ties to her Indian background and traditions because she is originally from that country. However, when she engages with clients from all ethnic origins, she discovers that there are various lifestyles and perspectives on the world. She starts to doubt her own morals and convictions and begins to imitate some characteristics of American culture.

Another example of acculturation in the book is how Tilo uses his study of spices to communicate with and comprehend other cultures. Tilo is able to overcome the cultural divide between herself and her patrons, many of whom are from other backgrounds, through the use of spices. Through their selection of spices, she discovers information about their gastronomy, traditions, and life experiences. Tilo gains a more nuanced awareness of the various cultures that exist in Oakland as a result of this knowledge and understanding exchange.

Acculturation, meanwhile, is not without its difficulties and traps. Tilo understands that if she spends too much time trying to understand and fit into American culture, she risks losing her sense of self. She begins to lose her connection to her Indian ancestry and her magical prowess. This shows that, despite the benefits of acculturation, it can also result in the loss of one's native identity and culture.

The Palace of Illusions, The Mistress of Spices, Sister of my heart, Queen of Dreams, and several more collections of short tales and poems are among the seminal writings of American author Chitra Baneerjee Divakaruni, who was born in India and now resides there. Divakaruni, who was raised in the United States while pursuing her higher education, was born in Kolkata, India. In many of her works, Divakaruni, an Indian immigrant who moved to the United States for her career, draws on her own experiences with challenges, trauma, identity crises, and cultural assimilation. She focuses on the struggles faced by South Asian immigrants, particularly women, as they attempt to find a balance between the East and the West. A couple of her novels have been adapted for the big screen, and her novels have been translated into several languages.

The creative tale of Tilo, a strange young woman with magical abilities, is called The Mistress of Spices. The author connects the occident and oriental worlds using the magical realism technique. Tilo was endowed at birth with unique abilities that allowed her to discover other people's secrets. She made friends and won respect in her little community by using her abilities to aid those in need. She was kidnapped by some pirates who intended to use her abilities, but she eventually landed on the island of spices, a peculiar location where young girls were taught to use spices to alleviate people's problems. Tilo learns the spices' secrets fairly fast because he is bright and disobedient. Later, she transforms into a conventional elderly woman and settles in Oakland, California to open a business selling spices and providing Indian immigrants with assistance in resolving their issues through the use of her magical spices. Her store turns into a place for immigrants from India to explore their own country. Through the use of the spices, Tilo aids many of her clients in resolving their issues. Tilo, however, is required to live a sober lifestyle. She is unable to fall in love, experience passions, live a modern lifestyle, or even leave her shop. However, she goes above and beyond to assist a handful of her clients, in keeping with her rebellious attitude. She also develops feelings for an American and nurtures the desire to spend the rest of her life with him while being aware of the negative effects. Tilo eventually finds the life she wants while retaining her new extraordinary abilities.

The contradiction between East and West presented in the book is between Indian tradition and American modernism. Tilo, the book's main character, is an independent, stubborn, rebellious, and smart young woman. She lacks the freedom to live her life as she

pleases since she is constrained by the customs of being a mistress of the spices. She practises self-control and works to assist her clients as best she can given the limitations of her abilities. She has free choice, though, and cannot be imprisoned by limitations for very long. She had broken several rules, even while serving her apprenticeship on the island of spices. Despite the first mother's concern, she insisted on being given the name Tilottama, which she had chosen for herself. Furthermore, she decides to open her shop in Oakland, California. However, the first mother, her tutor, is willing to pardon her because of her intelligence, audacity, and talent at manipulating spices. So before sending her to Oakland, he warns her against indulging in earthly pleasures.

The Old One addressed Tilo as "my daughter," and I could see from the look on her face that she understood my inner battle. "Tilo, my daughter," she said, "is most gifted, most troublesome, and most loved. Tilo is travelling to America eager as an arrow. I have something here for you." A piece of wild island ada, which she had taken from the folds of her garment, was placed on my tongue to give my heart firmness and to keep me steadfast in my vows. (Pg. 45 of *The Mistress of Spices*)

Indians who have settled in America for various reasons are the majority of customers at Tilo's shop. She plays the role of a grandmotherly figure, reflecting the customs of the country they had fled. They are reminded of their native country by the store. They thereby express their problems, discomforts, and sense of alienation, and Tilo assists them by providing the appropriate spices. Her heart yearns for anything out of the ordinary as she explores the new world she lives in and lives life to the fullest, becoming a symbol of Indian culture and heritage. She is drawn to Raven's charisma and his mystique when they first meet, and she soon begins to daydream of a life with him. She leaves the store first to inspect the new cab Haroun purchased before meeting Geeta and assisting her in returning to her parents. This breaking of her established boundaries is comparable to women breaking their patriarchal society's established boundaries. Tilo gradually apes American culture by her revolutionary deeds while holding onto the spirit of her native place via the spices. Despite knowing the danger and the consequences, she gives herself to love. "I admit that I am loving myself for the first time. Not the adoration I showed the Old One, and not the respect I had for the spices. However, human love is complicated, at once generous and demanding, whining and fervent. I'm terrified by the possibility of it. I now realise that the threat does not

come from the spices' wrath or their deserting, as I had previously thought. The real danger is that I might lose this Love in some way. (Page 183 of *The Mistress of Spices*) Her choice is costly because the power of the spices deserts her, but she decides to follow her heart above tradition by deciding to live in modern America with its emphasis on individual freedom and dreams rather than the constrictive life of a mistress.

Other characters also make an effort to overcome the acculturation paradox. Geeta is a young woman who resides in America with her parents and grandfather. She thinks her granddad is overly repressive and controlling because she was raised in the US. Her grandfather is very upset about it since he believes that her attitude, sense of style, and way of thinking are inconsistent with the culture of his home country. He considers Geeta's lifestyle to be unworthy of someone from a decent family. "That girl, this Sunday she cut her hair short-short so that even her neck is showing," he complains about her to Tilo. Geeta, what did you do? Your hair is the epitome of your womanhood, I'm saying to her. You are aware of her response, right? (Pg. 68 of *The Mistress of Spices*) Geeta's parents, though, are more tolerant than her grandfather. They don't mind if she goes out with her friends after work or buys luxury items like cars, but when it comes to marriage, they still support the idea of getting hitched in the neighbourhood. Years spent in the US only affected their attitudes towards education and enabling girls to work, not their decision for a life mate. They are therefore extremely disappointed when Geeta tells them about her boyfriend. But then, her grandfather continues, "He puts his fists down. You had my trust, he claims. His voice is worse than physical contact. (Pg. 72 of *The Mistress of Spices*)

The story of Geeta exemplifies how acculturation takes place over three generations. Even though he is living in a nation that is incomparably different from his native one, her grandfather is a strict traditionalist who wants to uphold his values and traditions. While Geeta finds herself extremely different from her parents, Geeta's parents, despite altering their opinions due to the influence of western culture, do not lose up on their essential principles and beliefs. She is unable to identify with the customs and ideals that her parents uphold. She believes that contemporary American culture is more tolerant than her own. When she leaves her residence, she finds a compromise by living with her friend Diana rather than her lover. The elder generation is stiff and inflexible, which makes it difficult for them to

adapt to the new world, but the younger generation is more adaptable and rapidly acculturated to the new society.

Another significant figure in the book is Lalita. She is a housewife who experiences domestic abuse from her husband Ahuja. She talks to Tilo about her issues while she is at his store purchasing some spices. She finally manages to get out of her situation by calling a helpline she discovered in a magazine Tilo gave her, and she then embarks on a new chapter of her life by opening her own tailoring business. For a traditional Indian woman, Lalita's action is ground-breaking because traditionally, Indian women were not supposed to stand up for themselves or leave their spouses to start their own lives. She finds the strength to leave her marriage under the influence of the society she was residing in. She is able to free herself from the tragedy of her marriage and forge her own identity in this way. In her letter to Tilo, she states, "I tell myself I deserve dignity and pleasure. Mataji, please ask for my strength so that I can find it. (Page 227 of *The Mistress of Spices*)

Haroun works as a cab driver in America and strives to succeed in life. He receives bullying and physical abuse for being an outsider rather than acceptance. A Punjabi youngster named Jagjit is frequently teased and bullied by his schoolmates due to his appearance, speech, and attitude. When Tilo's spices work against him, he reveals himself to be a wild man. Haroun and Jagjit are both victims of racism and ethnic prejudice that breed resentment and hostility towards the locals for mistreating them. Despite their greatest efforts to integrate into a culture that is not their own, they are not welcomed by American society.

Similar to Raven, his mother long kept the identities of his tribe's Red Indian members a secret from him. He was looking for his ancestors while the immigrants were attempting to forge identities for themselves in the new country. He was making an effort to ingrain himself in his culture. He reveals to Tilo his vision of a planet-sized paradise, saying, "For that is what I see behind my closed lids. Squirrels with their silk-brown eyes, red-tipped sequoias, and innocent blue eucalyptus. A place to develop and undergo transformation in. Its cascade has been frozen into soundlessness during this winter of chilly caverns and smoky flames. As we make love among fields of wild poppies, there is grit under our bare feet and on our naked backs in the summertime. (Page 242 of *The Mistress of Spices*) As a result, the author spins a complex and captivating tale of love, passion, desire, mysticism, and immigrant tragedy.

In their works, many post-colonial authors including Jhumpa Lahiri, V.S. Naipul, Chinua Achebe, and Bharti Mukherjee deftly highlight the negative effects of acculturation. In Jhumpa Lahiri's book *The Namesake*, two generations of immigrants who landed in the US are examined. It tells the tale of Ashok and Ashima, a Bengali couple who relocate to Massachusetts to begin a new life. At home, they maintain traditional Bengali culture, but Gogol and Sonia become dissatisfied due to their parents' multiple identities. Being neither American nor Bengali causes Gogol to experience some sort of identity problem. His parents become estranged as a result of this confusion; for example, "He is aware that his parents, their friends, and the children of their friends, as well as all his own friends from high school, will never call him anything but Gogol." (Page 103 of *The Namesake*) The book serves as an example of how younger generations who are born and raised abroad become estranged from their motherland's culture and how the ensuing crises causes unjustified grief and pain. When people are unable to associate themselves with any one location or culture, acculturation can also be painful.

Conclusion:

Through Tilo, the main character of *The Mistress of Spices*, voyage, the issue of acculturation is explored. The work discusses issues such as the difficulties immigrants have in adapting into a new culture, the conflict between traditional beliefs and Western influences, and the fine line between keeping one's individuality and assimilation into a new community.

In the current global environment, acculturation has become inevitable. For a variety of reasons, people travel to diverse locations, and it's important to adapt to the local culture. Both locals and immigrants are impacted by this cultural interchange. People adapt positive aspects of foreign cultures while changing elements that are outmoded. Acculturation can be overpowering when someone is inflexible and defensive, as was the case with Geetha's grandparents and parents, or advantageous when it is received graciously, as it was in the case of Tilo. A harmonious fusion of one's home culture and a foreign culture can aid in a person's identity preservation and seamless integration into the society they are currently living in. "Peace is not in unity in similarity but unity in diversity, in the comparison and conciliation of differences," Mikhail Gorbachev said. The protagonist Tilo's experiences in "*The Mistress of Spices*" are used to investigate the issue of acculturation. Tilo experiences a

process of assimilating and adapting to American culture through her interactions with clients from various racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as her own search for identity. She encounters difficulties along the road though, emphasising the complexity and subtleties of the acculturation process.

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