

## Migration And The Indian Diaspora: Exploring Chitra Divakaruni's Visions In Mistress Of Spices

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### ABSTRACT

*The complex realities of post-migration are reflected in the significant relevance of diaspora studies in contemporary global discourse. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Mistress of Spices, embodies these relationships and offers a diverse array of characters that reflect the immigrant experience. Geeta's grandfather is unable to adapt and embrace the American culture, Haorun is confronted with job insecurity, and Jagjit is a victim of racial discrimination and prejudice. Divakaruni depicts a spectrum of immigrant experiences—economic hardship, cultural retention, and othering—through these three pivotal characters. She addresses the true nature of the lives of immigrants by expressing these themes without glorifying America. In light of these circumstances, the aim of this study is to analyze the problem that immigrants frequently encounter in their host countries. Consequently, this paper emphasizes three critical obstacles by employing postcolonial studies and diaspora theories in Divakaruni's evocative narratives. Additionally, the analytical section, which deliberately integrates Haroun, Jagjit, and Geeta's grandfather as three predominant visions in her novel, elucidates the inevitable challenges that arise as pervasive challenges.*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, othering, cultural retention, discrimination, racism, Mistress of Spices.*

### Introduction

Migration has created diverse cultures and shaped societies worldwide. In the realm of diaspora, Indian immigrants have resulted a diverse and multicultural fabrics across the globe. The Indian diaspora's diverse range of socio-cultural background provides a rich canvas for exploring an array of diasporic issues such as Identity, culture, discrimination, and so on. Pertaining to these issues, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has evocatively articulated a rainbow of such issues in her seminal novel Mistress of Spices. This study tends to explore the issues of the Indian diaspora, focusing on three perspectives; othering, cultural retention, and economic hardship.

Divakaruni is recognized for her meticulous depiction of the immigrant experience. In order to clarify the intricate issues encountered by Indian migrants in the United States, she implements magical realism in Mistress of Spices. The diasporic context's concept of 'othering' denotes the process by which the hegemonic group marginalizes or discriminates against a

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minority (Becker, 2024). Stereotypical attributes to a group are frequently employed in the process of 'othering', which is founded on perceived characteristics. The victims of othering experience a sense of alienation within society as a result of this process (Devadoss, 2020), (Devadoss, 2018). Jagjit (Jaggi) is portrayed as a victim of othering in *Mistress of Spices*. Further, cultural retention is among the prominent issues of diasporic communities.

The primary challenge for the first generation is the adaptation to a different culture due to its origins in the home. Indian immigrants in the United States frequently encounter difficulties in preserving their cultural heritage (Bhandari, 2021). Bhatia (2007) also elucidates that Indian immigrants frequently adopt in order to reconcile their Indian heritage with their American experiences. Similarly, Prashad (2000) examines the manner in which the Indian diaspora manages cultural assimilation and retention. He contends that the broader American society frequently opposes the community's endeavors to maintain their cultural traditions. This dynamic perpetuates the notion that Indians are perpetual immigrants, irrespective of their citizenship status or duration of residence in the country (Sheikh, 2019). Divakaruni's representation of Geeta's grandfather, provides a poignant reflection of cultural retention. On various occasions in the novel, he feels insecurity in assimilation and encounters with his son and Geeta. Likewise, the spices represent the diaspora's ties to India and its cultural legacy, which is rich and varied. By watching Tilo's interactions with her customers, Divakaruni explores how cultural practices and traditions are maintained, modified, or transformed in a diaspora. In addition, economic problem is also a crucial factor in the Indian diaspora's ability to stay in the United States. Many Indian immigrants, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have economic difficulties. (Desai & Subramanian 2003). They note that while some members of the Indian diaspora have been financially successful, many others still face challenges such as discrimination at work, limited opportunities for advancement, and job insecurity. By limiting opportunities and resources that the dominant group has easier access to, economic marginalization further entrenches the othering process. We see Haroun as an epitome of financial insecurity in the novel. Furthermore, Indian writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee provide alternative stories that question the way the Indian diaspora is often portrayed (Varghese, 2019). These writers often delve into questions of belonging, resistance to othering, and identity. The complexities of immigrant experiences are vividly shown in *The Namesake* by Lahiri and *Jasmine* by Mukherjee, both of which center on the inner and outer struggles that Indian characters face in America. Their work helps us understand the diaspora more complexly, which highlights how important representation is in the struggle against othering.

Hence, this paper's aim is to analyze these issues in depth, exploring how *Mistress of Spices* represents multiple experiences of the Indian diaspora in America. Through an examination of the interplay of cultural retention, othering, and economic hardship, this study attempts to contribute in understanding the complexities of living as diaspora.

### **A Review of Previous Studies**

Rajan (2002) examined Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* cinematic adaption. The film illustrates the descriptive qualitative study of identity and its influences. Characters and identity problems drive the analysis. Three main characters—Tilo, Geeta, and Jagjit—face cultural clashes, age gaps, and societal rejection. The study concluded that identity is fluid, as shown by the film's characters. Zakiyah (2010) examined culture in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "*The Mistress of Spices*." It examines colonialism in postcolonial literature. Language, style, characters, context, socioeconomic standing, and culture show how the novel forms its identity. Language, clothing, and food traditions are used by the writer. The tale illustrates Indian traditions and cultural tensions, while Tilo's magical spice use addresses worldwide themes. For Divakaruni, spices are living things that symbolize the spread of knowledge beyond science.

According to Sebahi and Cheroun (2022), the Vedas and Puranas' comprehensive approach to health and healing is central to Ayurveda. Ayurveda approaches physical diseases (vyadhi) by focusing on the mind (manas), which is the root cause. Plant-based substances like spices (masala) were recommended for mental and physical balance. The novel "The Mistress of Spices" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the symbolic and literal healing powers of various spices in Indian culture. This research explores traditional ideas and their depiction in the novel to better understand spices as psychological cures. According to Goswami (2021), the novel *Mistress of Spices* depicts the complex lives of Indian immigrants in America. The novel explores the cultural significance of spices in Indian tradition, Tilo's internal conflict between duty and love, Indian immigrants' survival challenges, the search for identity, and the characters' attempts to find new identities in America. Through Tilo and other characters, the novel explores the complexities of living abroad and Indian origin. The story interweaves character stories to emphasize the complexity of identity. Chitra Banerjee emphasizes immigrants' different experiences in trying to keep or lose their traditions. Banerjee's story shows how to balance new opportunities and cultural preservation (Nongmaithem, 2014).

Meeran (2019) investigates how Indian diaspora books confront marginality through the protagonists' individual experiences. Using Stuart Hall's conceptions of 'being' and 'belonging,' it examines how these novels' core narrative consciousness explains and participates in migratory experience and identity development. Meeran's study shows the major narrator's inquiry and shaping of identity creation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*, to emphasize that identity is fluid. Sharma, Mehta (2022). Examine human migration and its effects on culture and identity, focusing on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Mistress of Spices*. Divakaruni explores the diasporic experience through Tilo, who uses magical seasonings to help immigrants. The chapter emphasizes the novel's use of nature and the environment to connect diasporas to their country, arguing that flora and fauna are essential to life and greatly affect migrants. This study uses Tim Kasser's environmental psychology and Emerson and Thoreau's eco-criticism to analyze *Mistress of Spices*. Agarwal and Kapil (2015) examined Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, focusing on the protagonist's philosophical and psychological goals and delusions. It uses Buddhist and psychoanalytic principles to highlight present cultural values, tensions, and issues to improve quality of life. The inquiry aims to show that Buddhism and psychoanalysis may work together through a fresh cross-cultural comparison.

The thesis by Lamor (2011) focused on Indian diaspora identity fractures and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel "The Mistress of Spices." The thesis examines how Divakaruni uses structural and thematic fragmentation to show her characters' suffering and difficulties. Gendered fragmentation highlights diasporic complexity. The analysis demonstrates that Divakaruni's novel uses fracturization strategies and empowers female characters by negotiating these shattered identities. Chougule and Barvekar (2020) examine spices' metaphorical meaning in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*. It explores identity issues and isolation faced by immigrant women. To represent Indian culture, Divakaruni depicts spices as living characters. The paper's three sections are cultural studies theory, character characteristics, and research findings. It promotes the story as a contemporary fable about an immigrant woman's metaphorical journey from India to the America.

The previous researchs conducted on Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* demonstrate the novel's significance and literary merit, as it integrates genuine issues through fictional characters. Several insights into the novel are provided by the multiplicity of perspectives. Nevertheless, these investigations are fundamentally distinct from the current investigation. Consequently, this paper endeavors to investigate the diasporic representations of Indian immigrants in the United States by identifying a moderate lacuna in the selected text.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Diasporic theory examines the experiences of individuals who have relocated from their homeland and established themselves in other countries. This theory points out the complex dynamics of identity, affiliation, and adaptation in a transnational context. It investigates the strategies that migrants employ to forge a sense of self and community as they navigate cultural boundaries (Grossman, 2019). The three critical concepts in diasporic theory that are particularly pertinent to Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* are 'cultural retention,' 'othering,' and 'economic hardship.' The purpose of this framework is to elucidate the interrelations between these concepts, thereby enabling a comprehensive understanding of diasporic experiences. The following discussion will provide a thorough elucidation of the concepts encapsulated by diaspora theory in order to investigate and understand "othering," "cultural retention," and "economic hardship." The research methodology of diaspora theory encourages us to consider the obstacles that communities face when they are residing in a foreign country.

The concept of "othering" is an important component of diaspora theory which explores the formation and marginalization of identities in different sociopolitical settings. Stereotyping and discrimination are common results of this process, which involves defining and designating certain groups as fundamentally different from the dominant group. Thus, diasporic theory's 'othering' examines how diasporic identities are created and marginalized (Sahay, 2009), (Rosa, 2017). This concept is crucial to understanding the complexities of living between cultures. Since diasporic identities are shaped by colonization and migration, Stuart Hall and other postcolonial theorists promote cultural retention as a strategy of identity assertion and resistance. 'Cultural retention' in diaspora theory describes how diasporic cultures adapt, preserve, and maintain their homeland cultural practices, beliefs, and tradition in their new societies (Hall, 2018). Cultural retention can resist assimilation, identity formation, and solidarity. It helps maintain a deeply rooted connection to the homeland. Diasporic communities reject cultural homogeneity and affirm their identity by preserving and practicing their cultures. Diaspora studies scholars study the complex relationship between cultural retention and citizenship, belonging, and transnationalism.

The analysis part will utilize the concept of 'cultural retention' to explore how Divakaruni's characters adapt and preserve their cultural heritage in new host land societies. Economic hardship often causes migration. Due to economic instability, poverty, or a lack of jobs, people leave their home to find better prospects elsewhere. Understanding diaspora formation requires understanding economic struggle first. Understanding economic hardship helps diasporic communities comprehend their socioeconomic issues. Thus, the third perspective of diaspora theory 'economic hardship,' will be used to analyse such issues in the novel *Mistress of Spices*.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

A prominent example of such an argument is evidenced by Stuart Hall's argument regarding cultural retention. Initially, Geeta's grandfather, a first-generation Indian immigrant, is in quest of mental peace since he arrived in America, as he is experiencing a lack of satisfaction. He visits Tilo's store on a weekly basis and vents his aversion to his granddaughter, Geeta. She is a diligent young woman who is employed by an engineering firm and aspires to the same level of autonomy that American girls possess. This consistently results in a conflict between her and her grandfather. Geeta, who was raised in America, prefers American culture to Indian culture. In contrast, her grandfather upholds a pure Indian culture and aspires to implement it in America. She is a member of a paradigmatic diasporic family that is characterized by a conflict between the old and the new. The novel frequently features an assortment of their disputes. For example, the elderly man conveys his pain to Tilo regarding his granddaughter, Geeta, who "works late in the office" (p. 88).

In India, women are infrequently employed; however, it is considered shameful for a woman to work late at night with men, according to traditional values. Consequently, his objective is to preserve the Indian cultural heritage in the United States. Similarly, he discloses that she occasionally visits them at their residence "after dark." This is unbearable for him, as he is unable to work with males after the evening. Consequently, he is unable to comprehend the fact that she is having a good time in their car that late at night. In any case, he is compelled to endure this harsh diasporic reality.

In the same vein, Geeta is incensed when she "cut her hair so short that her neck shows" (p. 88). In Indian culture, "hair" is considered one of the most precious assets of a woman, and everyone strives to grow it longer and more lustrous. Consequently, they employ a variety of remedies to achieve dense, shining hair. Conversely, in the United States, it is not uncommon for individuals to trim and dye their hair in order to achieve a new look, as evidenced by Geeta's statement to his grandfather, "I required a new style" (p. 88).

Additionally, her grandfather was perplexed by her decision to purchase a new vehicle with her own funds, as in Indian culture, a significant portion of a family's income is reserved for the daughter's dowry. Conversely, he observes that the girl is investing her own funds in the purchase of a vehicle, rather than accumulating savings for her future. She has a partner who is employed at an engineering company in addition to her personal preferences. Geeta introduces him as "Juan... Juan Cordero" (p. 89). Nevertheless, her family, particularly her grandfather, was initially taken aback by the arrangement, as it is not a topic that is discussed openly in India; rather, it is a practice that involves elder members of the family. Geeta's parents were assimilated into American culture, which included working late, spending time with friends, and purchasing a car. However, they were shocked by Geeta's decision to marry a Caucasian or Mexican man, and they never permitted her to do so. In reality, he was of Chicano descent and had migrated to Mexico, which incited her grandfather's rage, resulting in him "marring a man whose people are criminals and illegal immigrants" (p. 90). It was unable to accept and even tolerate such a marriage based on ethnicity, and it resolved to return to its homeland, stating, "I would rather die alone there than stay here in this country which I don't understand" (p. 91). Therefore, in the event of her marriage, no member of her family could disregard Indian culture. Regrettably, it is a common practice in America to cause dissatisfaction among parents in order to pursue personal interests. Consequently, Geeta departed from her father's residence and went to Juan's residence, "I'm leaving! And I am never coming back!" (p. 91). The following morning, he visits Tilo and requests her assistance with his family. She provides him with a unique blend of saffron and almonds, which she boils in milk and serves to the entire family. This beverage is intended to enhance their thoughts and words.

The Indian immigrants experience difficulty in assimilating and acculturating to the new culture. Haroun, a "regular customer" of Tilo, immigrated from Kashmir in pursuit of the American ideal; however, he is currently employed by an Indian nightmare. He illegally enters the United States in order to lead a peaceful existence after his family was killed in a terrorist attack. In the narrative, he is depicted as a limousine driver who operates a Rolls Royce for a wealthy Indian woman. When he returns to Recipe Bazaar for the second time, he is anxious about his fortune and implores Tilo to "read my palm." His restlessness indicates that he is dissatisfied with his present position. He endeavored to secure employment for three months, but was unsuccessful. Ultimately, he encountered "an old friend from his village" (p. 34) who was in search of a new driver for his vehicle. Consequently, he resigned from his position to pursue a relationship with the Indian woman.

Consequently, Divakaruni illustrates the "economic hardship" experienced by the diaspora through the character of Haroun, a young man. The character demonstrates that it is difficult to secure employment, and even if an individual does, it does not necessarily imply that they are satisfied with the position. Rather, they must adapt to the available opportunities.

Furthermore, Tilo cautions him that a position can be hazardous, stating, "It's a beautiful car. But please be careful in it" (p. 34) she advises, and she also provides him with "black cumin" to safeguard him from harm. Ultimately, the novel reveals that Haroun was involved in an accident, as Tilo perceives "someone bent over the wheel" in her vision. Consequently, it is evident that Divakaruni's portrayal of Haroun's character provides a visionary perspective on the obstacles faced by a diasporic community in securing employment. In this way, she indirectly cautions individuals who become delusional in their pursuit of the American ideal.

Jagjit, a ten-and-a-half-year-old schoolboy, initially visits the store with his mother. Tilo observes that Jagjit is a shy child. He is portrayed as a symbol of "othering," and his actions demonstrate the numerous challenges that immigrants encounter, including discrimination and stereotyping by the dominant group. His primary challenge is the language impediment, as he is only familiar with Punjabi, which causes him to struggle in school. He was primarily mocked at his school for his lack of proficiency in the English language. It is ironic that he acquired the English term "idiot," which is why his teacher has relegated him to the last pew. They mock him and exclaim, "Talk English, son of a bitch," the same ill-treatment he endures from his peers in school, "Speak up, you wetback asshole" (p. 39). This demonstrates the language barrier that the diaspora community encounters in the host country.

Similarly, he is subjected to bullying as a result of his Sikh heritage. For example, "They pull his turban off his head" (p. 39). His mother consistently complains about his dirty clothing, as a result of his physical mistreatment. In such circumstances, he was unable to assimilate into the new environment and was primarily preoccupied with the memory of his village in India. His knees were bleeding after a group of lads pushed him to the ground. He desired to discuss his inability to maintain his native identity in the new culture with his mother, but she refused to listen and imposed pressure on him by stating, "Your father is killing himself, working hard in the factory" (p. 40). Tilo distributes cinnamon and places a portion of cinnamon in his turban, which will facilitate the formation of friendships. He has formed friendships with individuals who are unfortunately unsavory, and he becomes a collaborator with criminals. In order to surmount these obstacles, he changes his identity from 'Jagjit' to 'Jag,' from a shy boy to criminal, and adopts a new culture in order to integrate with the mainstream citizens.

## **Conclusion**

Divakaruni, through the pivotal Indian immigrants, addresses three critical issues that all individuals should be aware of before migrating to America, or else. The novelist primarily conveys themes of cultural conflict, survival, race, and discrimination through the creation of characters such as Haroun, Jagjit, and Geeta's grandfather. Haroun is portrayed as a prime example of economic challenges, including the difficulty of securing employment or working with an unfavorable employer. Jagjit is depicted as the representative for an ongoing problem that affects all non-English speaking communities. He was depicted as a victim of racialism and the language a barrier, and in order to adapt to his new environment, he becomes a drug trafficker. Uma Girish also encountered a real-life incident involving the author, in addition to Jaggi's language barrier, "in 1976 Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni was appalled when a handful of white adolescents hurled slush at her and shouted "nigger" as she strolled down a Chicago street with her relatives." Despite no one mentioning the embarrassing episode again, it lingered with her and prompted her to write. Therefore, Jaggi's character explicitly illustrates the process by which emigrants attempt to adapt to their new language and environment by adopting a new identity that is consistent with their culture.

Furthermore, Geeta's grandfather demonstrated the epitome of cultural conflict, as he has consistently failed to assimilate into American culture and was unable to consider beyond his Indian heritage. Consequently, Divakaruni seamlessly integrates economic hardship, cultural retention, and othering throughout the novel. She has employed these secondary

characters to illuminate the obstacles encountered by an immigrant community that moved from India to the United States. Furthermore, her principal character, Tilo, gives spices as hurts' healer to these Indian immigrants, cures their issues, victimization and alienation.

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