



Identity Crisis and Cultural Displacement in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *'The Mistress of Spices'*

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Abstract

One of the most important contributions to diasporic literature in recent times is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *'The Mistress of Spices'*, as it balances magical realism with immigrant struggles. This paper examines how this novel evokes cultural hybridity, self-reinvention, and the tension between tradition and modernity within the larger group of Indian diasporic narratives. The study compares Divakaruni's protagonist, Tilo, with Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* to show how Tilo represents the immigrant paradox of wanting agency for the self while being constrained by cultural heritage. Whereas Lahiri presents a realistic portrayal of immigrants struggling in the new land, Divakaruni uses symbolism and myth to outline the exile and the shattered identities of diasporic people. Likewise, although Mukherjee's *Jasmine* undergoes radical self-reinvention, Tilo's transformation is still linked to ancestral traditions and mystical obligations. The ultimate question the novel wrestles with is whether cultural heritage helps a person belong or hinders self-determination. Although some critics accuse *'The Mistress of Spices'* of exoticizing Indian culture through the use of mysticism, the novel still serves as a fascinating treatment of migration, the self, and memory. Divakaruni's book bargains the intricate dialogues of cultural assimilation, and broadens the boundaries of diasporic narrating, and it presents the delicate analysis of identity construction in immigrant people.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Cultural Displacement, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*.

1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a Diasporic Writer

Indian-American writer, poet, and professor Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is well recognized for her works that mostly deal with themes of migration, cultural displacement, gender roles, and the intricacies of identity among the South Asian diaspora. She was born in Kolkata, India, in 1956, and moved to the United States in the late 1970s, where she received higher education and later began her literary career. As a woman of immigrant background, Divakaruni has a deep understanding of the struggles that immigrants face trying to live between two cultures, a theme that runs through her entire literary oeuvre. In the early works, the short stories collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995), was highly praised, cementing her status as a prominent voice of modern literature. She discusses the predicament of Indian women in the United States, who are trapped between traditional expectations and modern realities (Divakaruni, *Arranged Marriage*, 1995, p. 47). In many of her subsequent novels, including *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *The Vine of Desire* (2002), identity, exile, and a longing for belonging are kept in the foreground. *"The Mistress of Spices"* (1997) marks a novel that is distinct in utilizing magical realism together with the immigrant experience and conveys a serious commentary on identity crisis and cultural displacement.

Introduction to 'The Mistress of Spices' and Its Thematic Concerns

'The Mistress of Spices' is about Tilo, an Indian woman who possesses mystical powers to heal and

lead people through spices. An ancient teacher trains her on a secret island and gives her the duty of being a Mistress of Spices, a guardian who helps others, but only under strict rules of detachment and discipline. Tilo is a spice shop in Oakland, California, run by a man who helps the members of the Indian diaspora as they all struggle with their cultural conflicts and personal hardships. It is not just a story of magic, but rather this story tells very strongly of the struggles of immigrants, their identity, and the friction between tradition and modernity. The Indian immigrants in the novel have to deal with racism, alienation, and problems of assimilation as they attempt to hold on to their heritage. The mystical responsibilities of Tilo herself are torn between her yearning for personal freedom, especially when she falls in love with an American man, Raven. This conflict is similar to the larger issue that immigrants face: to assimilate or to maintain their ethnic identity. Magical realism is essential in the narrative as it symbolizes the experience of the immigrant. Again, like spices have the power to heal and the power to transform, they are also a reference to the deep and innate connection between culture and identity. In the novel, identity is depicted as fluid and multiple, and cultural belonging is not always a matter of choice, but is sometimes forced upon one by external forces, like racial discrimination and societal expectations (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 128).

Importance of Analyzing Identity Crisis and Cultural Displacement in the Novel

The identity crisis of the immigrants, who are compelled to bridge the gap between their homeland's cultural traditions and the norms of the adopted country, is one of the main themes of *'The Mistress of Spices.'* The struggle of being an immigrant is embodied by Tilo. Granted mystical knowledge and power, she is also bound by restrictive rules that keep her from joining the world around her. This is a paradox that many immigrants experience pushing to hold on to the need to uphold the tradition of their native land but having the same time they wish to be assimilated and redefine themselves in a new land. Another major theme of the novel is cultural displacement, which is evident in the lives of Tilo's customers. For example, Jagjit, a young Sikh boy who is bullied at school, and Lalita, a woman trapped in an abusive marriage, are among those who suffer from the consequences of being outsiders in American society (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 89). This is shown through the characters that illustrate real-life conflicts of the South Asian diaspora, especially in identity, gender roles, or racial discrimination. The novel also constructs questions about the meeting place of personal wants and the socially expected. Tilo's attraction to Raven, a Native American man, is an inner conflict between love and self-determination versus fulfilling the role tradition has assigned to her. It is possible that her decision to opt to embrace her human identity rather than be hampered by her mystical one was meant to be an act of agency, showing that it has to be possible to escape the fixed state that cultural identity is supposed to be in. *'The Mistress of Spices'* is a reflection of how the identity crisis and cultural displacement of immigrants affect their lives, from the point of view of magical realism. Spices are a symbol of both connection and alienation: they provide comfort and healing to those who seek them out, but they also serve to separate Tilo from the human experiences she wants to participate in. Thus, the novel is a strong commentary on the immigrant experience, the conflict between past and present, tradition, and change.

Scope of the Study

The purpose of this review is to critically analyze *'The Mistress of Spices'* with regard to the themes of identity crisis and cultural displacement. The review aims to show how Divakaruni depicts the psychological and emotional problems of those in a diaspora by looking at Tilo's character and her relationships with other members of the immigrant community. The scope of this analysis includes:

1. A discussion of Tilo's transformation and how she embodies the immigrant experience.
2. An exploration of the novel's secondary characters and their struggles with identity and belonging.
3. An examination of how magical realism serves as both a literary device and a metaphor for the diasporic condition.
4. A comparative perspective on Divakaruni's treatment of similar themes in her other works.

This review will engage with other literary critiques and theoretical frameworks to understand thoroughly how *'The Mistress of Spices'* puts in the discourse of migration, identity, and cultural hybridity. The most significant trait of the novel is in humanizing the immigrant experience and conveying to the reader the emotional, psychological, and social components of cultural displacement. In the end, this research will show how Divakaruni's writing has meaning in the discourse of globalization and migration, and how there is a continuous struggle for personal identity vs. cultural heritage. Also, the novel's investigation of identity and displacement is still relevant because migration and multiculturalism are very current issues in the world today.

Theoretical Framework

Concepts of Identity Crisis in Literature and Psychology

The idea of an identity crisis was coined by Erik Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a period of confusion and doubt about oneself that can occur when one is going through a major life transition. According to him, identity formation is an important psychological task and if interrupted, particularly due to external pressures such as migration or cultural displacement, it can result in deep psychological distress (Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 1968, p. 17).

Diasporic narratives prevail because the literature tends to portray identity crises in characters that are kept down between contending cultural identities. Migration is also marked by the psychological turmoil of its protagonists, who seek to resolve their desires with their hereditary traditions and whose literary hauls repeatedly include this struggle. These stories look at how one's self-perception, expectations in society, and heritage have influenced one's perception of self that they carry with them. The conflict of identity is often a conflict between tradition and modernity, and the only way to resolve it is to reinvent oneself or negotiate with culture.

Tilo's Identity Crisis in 'The Mistress of Spices'

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *'The Mistress of Spices'* (1997) she explores an identity crisis; specifically as a challenge one faces whilst immigrating and being displaced from culture. Tilo is an Indian woman who has been transformed through mysticism and trained to be a Mistress of Spices, a mystical role that ties her to serve others. She is then sent to Oakland, California, where she runs a spice shop and assists immigrant customers who are struggling with their identity conflicts. Tilo's inner struggle reflects that of the immigrant in general, caught between two very different cultural spheres, the mystical, traditional Indian world of the Mistresshood and the modern, individualistic world of America. In the novel, this conflict is evident as Tilo:

- Struggles with her assigned identity as a Mistress, bound by strict rules that dictate that she cannot form personal attachments or deviate from her sacred duty (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 56).
- Yearns for personal agency and love, particularly in her relationship with Raven, a Native American man who represents her desire for autonomy and modernity (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 152).
- Feels emotionally unmoored, caught between her mystical past and the contemporary realities of immigrant life in America (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 89).

This cultural duality creates an ongoing identity crisis as Tilo questions who she is—a woman bound by tradition or an individual who can shape her destiny. The novel suggests that immigrants must constantly renegotiate their sense of self, as cultural identity is fluid rather than fixed.

Psychological Aspects of Identity Crisis in Migration

From a psychological perspective, identity crises among immigrants can lead to disorientation, alienation, and self-fragmentation. Salman Akhtar, in *Immigration and Identity: Turmoil, Treatment, and Transformation* (1999), introduces the concept of "psychic homelessness," which describes the emotional detachment that immigrants feel from both their homeland and their new country (Akhtar, *Immigration and Identity*, 1999, p. 45).

According to Akhtar, psychic homelessness results from:

1. Loss of Cultural Anchors → Immigrants are uprooted from the familiar customs, language, and traditions that once gave them a sense of stability.
2. Liminal Existence → They live in a "liminal space" where they are neither fully part of their homeland nor fully integrated into their host country.
3. Fragmented Self → Over time, they experience a divided identity, struggling to reconcile who they were, who they are, and who they want to be.

This idea is central to *'The Mistress of Spices'*, where Tilo exists in a liminal space between two worlds:

- She clings to the traditions of the Mistresshood, which act as a cultural anchor but also limit her ability to fully experience life.
- She longs for self-liberation yet fears that embracing personal freedom means losing her cultural essence.
- Her customers also embody psychic homelessness, as they struggle to preserve their heritage while adapting to American life.

Through Tilo's journey, Divakaruni highlights the deep psychological struggles of migration,

illustrating that identity formation for immigrants is an evolving and often painful process.

Cultural Identity and Self-Perception in 'The Mistress of Spices'

Identity crises often stem from conflicting self-perceptions, especially among immigrants caught between two cultures. Stuart Hall, in his seminal essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), argues that identity is not fixed but constantly shaped by history and social interactions (Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, 1990, p. 225).

Hall proposes two key ways to view cultural identity:

1. Essentialist Identity → A fixed, singular cultural identity that immigrants attempt to preserve.
2. Evolving Identity → A fluid sense of self that adapts to new cultural contexts.

In *'The Mistress of Spices'*, Tilo's internal struggle mirrors Hall's theory:

- Initially, she clings to an essentialist identity, believing she must remain faithful to her past and her role as a Mistress (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 56).
- As the novel progresses, she begins to embrace an evolving identity, realizing that she can be both Indian and American, traditional and modern (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 203).

Tilo's final decision to break free from the Mistresshood and embrace love symbolizes the acceptance of a hybrid identity, affirming that one's cultural background does not have to be a limitation but can coexist with new self-definitions.

In *'The Mistress of Spices'*, the idea of identity crisis is not confined to Tilo's journey; the immigrant struggles to define self. Drawing upon Erikson's theory of identity formation, Akhtar's concept of psychic homelessness, and Hall's model of cultural identity, Divakaruni expresses a true and greatly emotional story of displacement and self-reinvention. Finally, the novel claims that the term identity is not choosing between the two worlds, but rather learning to live with both the worlds one has experienced. Through Tilo's evolution, the audience sees self-identity as fluid, resilient, and capable of spanning different cultural landscapes.

Cultural Displacement and Hybridity in Diasporic Narratives: An Expanded Analysis

Diasporic literature revolves around the theme of cultural displacement which is all about the difficulties encountered by individuals who are uprooted from their homeland when adjusting to a new sociocultural environment. Displacement commonly causes alienation, nostalgia, a broken identity, and absorption in between past cultural-clad and host country obligations. This in-betweenness makes immigrants feel other, and to be other, a perpetual sense of not belonging to either culture. Literature that negotiates an individual's place within someone's body or in very liminal spaces (between two or three worlds) is often seen in diasporic literature, describing the psychological, emotional, and social struggles that are often part of the migrant's journey. The displaced self is often portrayed as having dual consciousness, that is, the person is neither fully a part of the host culture nor fully a part of their homeland. Therefore, it means the constant questioning of identity, and producing the process of cultural hybridity, a blend of elements of many cultures, which forms a new, hybrid self.

Cultural Displacement in 'The Namesake'

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003) offers a compelling exploration of cultural displacement and identity crisis. Gogol Ganguli is the protagonist who is born to Bengali immigrant parents in the United States and has to struggle with his dual identity. On the other hand, he is brought up in a traditional Indian household where Bengali customs, language, and expectations are emphasized. However, he was raised in an American society that promotes individualism and cultural assimilation. Gogol oscillates between his Bengali heritage and his American identity throughout the novel, neither fully connected to his parents' cultural traditions nor fully at home in American society (Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 2003, p. 105). He resents the unfamiliarity of his Bengali name in an American context and his name itself becomes a symbol of his cultural alienation. It is a story of how he tried to cope with these two cultural worlds of his, the experience common with many first-generation immigrants—the tug of war between traditional paradigms and the looming marks of modernity. Lahiri's novel becomes a witness to the complexity of cultural displacement as in the process of becoming an immigrant identities are formed by the navigation between past and present. Despite being very different from the other works, themes in *The Namesake* resonate with quite a lot of other works of diasporic literature; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *'The Mistress of Spices'* is a case in point, as Tilo's struggling with her own identity reflects the general psychological struggle which is at the heart of being displaced.

Cultural Hybridity and Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" Theory

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Displacement promotes cultural hybridity whereby people can assimilate various cultural sources into a contemporary evolving identity. The Third Space is a liminal space of hybridity discussed by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), where hybrid identities are created. Using this space, Bhabha disrupts binary identities such as self/other, and native/foreign by depicting identity as fluid, dynamic, and always changing (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Bhabha's idea of hybridity is very useful in understanding how diasporic individuals are in between cultures. The Third Space is a space that does not offer a choice between two cultures, it allows for the development of new cultural identities with new cultural practices that are a hybrid of two cultures. However, this hybridity is not always a comforting one: there is a sense of instability and an inner conflict of various orders in which they try to place themselves between several cultural frameworks.

Hybridity in "The Mistress of Spices"

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo is a hybrid identity, a mystical Indian figure and a woman living in contemporary American life. Trained as a Mistress of Spices, she is deeply rooted in Indian traditions, but physically located in Oakland, California, where she interacts with Indian immigrants who come to her for guidance and healing. The fluidity of diasporic identity is represented in her ability to cross the boundaries of time and space, but she cannot be stable in her identity. It only worsens her internal conflict, which is in line with Bhabha's idea that cultural hybridity is a place of both possibility and tension (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 152).

- Tilo's Indian identity is reinforced through her mystical knowledge of spices, which symbolize ancestral wisdom and cultural memory.
- Tilo's American experience exposes her to Western notions of personal freedom and self-assertion, challenging her belief that she must conform to the rigid traditions of Mistresshood.
- Her attraction to Raven, a Native American man, symbolizes her desire to embrace love and personal agency, further complicating her sense of belonging.

Tilo's internal struggle between duty and self-expression mirrors the experiences of many immigrants navigating dual identities. While cultural hybridity allows for flexibility, it also creates emotional distress as individuals constantly renegotiate their cultural affiliations.

Bhabha's Concept of Mimicry and Identity Fragmentation

Again, one of the more important notions brought up by Homi Bhabha is that of mimicry which suggests that colonized or displaced individuals imitate the dominant culture and cling to the roots of their quotidian traditions. From the perspective of mimicry, it is a double-edged phenomenon, because, on the one hand, it enables individuals to assimilate into the dominant culture; on the other hand, it can cause fragmented self-perception and identity conflicts (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 50). In *The Mistress of Spices*, many of Tilo's Indian customers in Oakland behave in a Western manner but hold onto their Indian roots. This leads to an identity crisis for them, for they are neither completely Western nor entirely Indian, and they live a hybrid existence of internal contradictions.

- Geeta, a young Indian-American woman, rejects the traditional expectations of arranged marriage, causing tension with her family (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 103). Her decision to choose her partner is seen as a betrayal of Indian customs, yet it also reflects her desire for self-determination in an American setting.
- Jagjit, a Sikh boy, faces bullying for wearing a turban, leading him to question whether he should abandon his traditional identity to fit in with his American peers (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 89). His struggle highlights the pressures to assimilate while still maintaining cultural heritage.

Through these characters, Divakaruni explores how mimicry can lead to a fragmented sense of self, where individuals feel compelled to adapt to Western norms while simultaneously longing for cultural continuity.

Diasporic literature centers on cultural displacement and hybridity because it shows the state of psychological and emotional displacement of humans who are surrounded by more than one cultural identity. Cultural hybridity is a condition of innovation and self-reinvention, but it is also a state of instability and inner conflict as shown in both *The Mistress of Spices* and *The Namesake*. By applying Homi Bhabha's theory of the "Third Space", this paper presents an applicable framework to evaluate diasporic individuals who create hybrid identities that oppose the traditional notions of belonging. Yet, it is not comfortable hybridity, for it possesses fragments of identity, alienates the self, and continuously strives to define the self. In the end, *The Mistress of Spices* implies that identity is never fixed but is always in the process of being formed through

cultural interaction. Divakaruni portrays the tumultuous nature of diasporic life using Tilo's journey and the stories of the immigrant characters, where one constantly struggles to adapt while integrating tradition and tradition while continually reformulating one's selfhood.

Theories of Cultural Identity: Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall – An Expanded Analysis

Homi Bhabha's Third Space and Cultural Identity

Among the most influential concepts in postcolonial and diasporic studies, concerning understanding cultural identity, is Homi Bhabha's Third Space theory. Bhabha presents a challenge to the belief that identity is only one thing, only static, only of one location; identity or culture within *The Location of Culture* (1994). He argues rather that identity is always being reworked through cultural interaction, negotiation, and hybridity (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 50). Bhabha describes the Third Space as a liminal space of cultural enunciation that is occupied by individuals who are neither fully of the homeland nor fully of the host culture (immigrants, exiles, colonized subjects), and thus create a new hybrid identity. In this theory, binary categories such as self/other or native/foreigner do not construct a fixed essence of identity formation, but rather they describe identity formation as fluid and continuing. Tilo is the embodiment of this Third Space in 'The Mistress of Spices' as she straddles between her Indian spiritual identity and her changing self in the United States. Her mystical connection to spices stands for her deep-rooted cultural heritage while her attraction to Raven, an American man, is her desire to be reinvented and to have individual autonomy. The conflict between these two aspects shows the difficulty of preserving cultural authenticity and adapting to a new sociocultural environment (Divakaruni, 'The Mistress of Spices', 1997, p. 190). Tilo's experiences resemble the wider immigrant dilemma: the quantity of one's past to hold onto and the quantity to change or modify. Her story communicates that identity is not between the two cultures but a hybrid identity that encompasses a choice of both. It is in line with Bhabha's point that diasporic identities are formed through a process of negotiation and interaction in the Third Space.

Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity and Diaspora

Stuart Hall, in his influential essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), provides another key framework for understanding diasporic identity formation. He distinguishes between two perspectives on cultural identity:

1. Essentialist Identity → This view sees identity as a shared cultural essence rooted in history, ancestry, and collective memory. According to this perspective, identity is fixed and stable, passed down through generations.
2. Constructivist Identity → This view posits that identity is not an inherited essence but a fluid and dynamic process shaped by historical and social interactions (Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, 1990, p. 225).

Hall's constructivist view is particularly relevant to Tilo's transformation throughout the novel. Her shifting identities—from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilo—illustrate the instability of diasporic identity, where self-definition is an ongoing negotiation rather than a static concept (Divakaruni, 'The Mistress of Spices', 1997, p. 203). Hall's theory suggests that cultural identity is always in flux, influenced by migration, historical change, and social interaction. In 'The Mistress of Spices', Tilo's internal struggle represents the complexities of diasporic identity, as she must continuously adapt and redefine herself to survive in a new cultural environment.

Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic and the Transnational Nature of Diasporic Identity

But Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) extends diasporic identity formation by focusing the transnational identities. Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic*, 1993, p. 5) argues that diasporic identities cannot be restricted within national boundaries because they are created through cross-cultural exchanges, migrations, and colonial histories. This idea is especially relevant to 'The Mistress of Spices' in which Tilo and her customers have such deep emotional and cultural connections to India even though they are physically in America. In reality, their criticism of national allegiances has more to do with their diasporic condition than their relationship with the nation. Gilroy's idea of the "double consciousness" referred to by W.E.B. Du Bois is further used to explain that diasporic individuals associate themselves with two different perspectives at once; they must find a way to reverse their ancestral culture with the one of the society they are living in. The transnational identity construction in diaspora communities is represented through Tilo's hybrid existence, her longing for India, and her longing to take up new possibilities in America.

Role of Magical Realism in Representing Diasporic Struggles

Magical Realism as a Tool for Exploring Displacement

The literary genre, magical realism, is a superlative literary tool for depicting the psychological and emotional struggles of immigrants, which merges the supernatural with the realm of the earthly reality. This genre enables authors to depict the surreal nature of cultural displacement in which people feel alienated from their homeland and new environment. Authors can use magic to blend the past with the present, memories of home with daily life, and cultural traditions with personal identity in unfamiliar spaces by blending magic with lived experience.

Magical Realism in "The Mistress of Spices"

In *'The Mistress of Spices'*, Tilo's gift to talk to spices represents the intricate bond between immigrants and their cultural heritage. All spices have mystical power but they represent the primal power of tradition, history, and memory. Nevertheless, her reliance on this mystical identity also isolates her, because the paradox of cultural heritage is that it offers comfort and belonging, but can also be a limitation (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 63).

Tilo's magical connection to spices represents:

- The preservation of Indian culture in the diaspora → The spices serve as a link to the past, keeping Indian traditions alive in a foreign land.
- The constraints of tradition → While spices give Tilo a sense of purpose, they also restrict her choices, preventing her from fully integrating into American life.
- The immigrant's dual existence → Tilo exists between the mystical and the real, the past and the present, much like immigrants who must negotiate between two cultural identities.

Comparison with Magical Realism in Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children'

A similar use of magical realism is found in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), where the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, possesses telepathic powers that connect him to other children born at the moment of India's independence. This mystical ability symbolizes the fragmented yet interconnected nature of postcolonial identity (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 1981, p. 210).

Like Tilo, Saleem struggles with:

- A deep connection to history → His powers represent India's collective memory, just as Tilo's spices represent Indian traditions in the diaspora.
- A fractured sense of self → Saleem's body falls apart, much like the instability of immigrant identities.
- The burden of cultural expectations → Saleem and Tilo are both shaped by the past yet struggle to assert personal agency in the present.

Both Divakaruni and Rushdie separate the creation of the surreal and contradictory experiences of immigrants from the peculiarities of immigration by employing magical realism: through this device, they reveal how immigration can shape not only personal but also collective identities. Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy's theories furnish us with all important frameworks to understand cultural identity as a dynamic and fluid process. *'The Mistress of Spices'* shows the saga of Tilo, the struggles of being in the diaspora, and the problems of keeping the cultural inheritance in the newly expanded environment, depicting the complexities of forming a diasporic identity. However, the fictional aspects of the work are enriched by magical realism, which allows Divakaruni to depict unconsciously the psychological and emotional conflicts of migration. The use of theoretical concepts of identity with literary techniques brings out what seems to be a powerful thesis on displacement, hybrid identity, and cultural belonging in the contemporary world where culture has been melded beyond its natural regions.

Identity Crisis in "The Mistress of Spices"

'The Mistress of Spices' (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a tale of an identity crisis that takes us through the journey of the protagonist Tilo. Her struggle is the struggle of every immigrant, shifting between her past and present, tradition and modernity. In this section, she is transformed across different identities, her inner conflict between cultural traditions and contemporary life, her past influences her self-perception and her psychological struggle between duty and personal desire.

Character Study of Tilo: Transformation from Nayan Tara to 'The Mistress of Spices' - An Expanded Analysis

Tilo's Early Identity as Nayan Tara: A Gifted but Isolated Child

'The Mistress of Spices' is about Tilo's identity crisis which is in turn caused by the many transformations she goes through. Born Nayan Tara, which means 'Star of the Eye,' she was born in a rural Indian village. She shows supernatural abilities from an early age, especially the gift of foresight, that she can predict the future. She, however, rather than being embraced for her

uniqueness is fear and isolated by those around her. The way her village treats her power is a reflection of how societies tend to alienate those who do not fit the norm. This is the beginning of Tilo's lifelong battle with belonging and identity. This gift makes her special but also makes her an outsider, and highlights one of the novel's main themes of the paradox of uniqueness and alienation (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 12). When she is abducted by pirates, Tilo's forced transformation begins as they exploit her abilities for their gain. Her first severance from her original identity comes from this traumatic event. She is taken far from home and put in a situation where she has no control over her fate. This is similar, in the extent of one's ability to be forced into a new identity beyond one's control, to many immigrants or displaced persons.

Tilo's Rebirth on the Mystical Island: Becoming a Mistress of Spices

After escaping the pirates, Tilo finds herself on a mystical island where she meets the First Mother, a powerful and mysterious woman who trains young women to become Mistresses of Spices. The First Mother renames her Tilottama, Tilo for short, a new name that signifies her rebirth into a new role (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 33). It is a highly symbolic renaming process, the erasure of her past self, and the imposition of a new predetermined identity. The First Mother essentially takes away Tilo's autonomy by renaming her, transforming her into a servant of the spices, not a person with personal agency.

Her training on the island is both empowering and restrictive:

- Empowering → She gains knowledge of the sacred powers of spices, which allow her to heal and guide others. This gives her a sense of purpose and strength, making her feel connected to something greater than herself.
- Restrictive → She is bound by strict rules that dictate her obedience, sacrifice, and detachment from personal desires. These rules suggest that to fulfill her duty, she must forsake personal happiness and individuality.

Tilo's training reflects the tension between duty and self-expression—a key theme in diasporic identity formation. Many immigrants and displaced individuals feel an obligation to preserve cultural traditions, even when those traditions limit their ability to grow and evolve in a new environment.

Tilo's Arrival in Oakland: Adopting Yet Another Identity

Upon completing her training, Tilo is sent to Oakland, California, where she takes on yet another disguise—that of an old woman running a spice shop. This transformation serves a specific purpose:

- Physically → Her aged appearance reinforces her separation from earthly desires, making her seem wise, detached, and solely dedicated to her role.
- Symbolically → By becoming an elderly woman, she attempts to remove herself from human experiences like love, longing, and personal ambition (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 56).

But Tilo soon discovers that being a Mistress does not protect her from human feelings. The more she interacts with the Indian immigrant community, the more she starts to rediscover suppressed emotions and desires. The start of her internal conflict begins in Oakland, as she begins to doubt the absoluteness of *'The Mistress of Spices'* identity that she has become. Immigration, adaptation, and longing become real and complex through her dealings with other people.

Struggles with Dual Identity: Tradition vs. Modernity

Tilo and the Rigid Traditions of the Mistresshood

Tilo's identity crisis becomes most evident in her struggle between the rigid traditions of her mystical upbringing and the modern, secular world she inhabits in America. As a Mistress of Spices, she is bound by strict rules:

- She cannot form personal attachments.
- She must never leave her spice shop.
- She must prioritize her duty over personal desires.

These rules are the reflection of rigid expectations of tradition, which usually require sacrifice for self, duty, and restraint of personal fulfillment (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 74). But as Tilo throws herself into the Indian immigrant community, she starts to doubt the validity of these rules. She is exposed to the real-world problems of immigrants, racism, generational conflict, assimilation, and so on, through her customers. Her most impactful encounter is with Jagjit, a Sikh boy who is bullied for wearing a turban. This is his experience of the pressures that immigrants are under to conform to Western norms (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 89). It is a turning point for Tilo, as she comes to understand that tradition can be harmful rather than helpful if blindly followed.

Tilo's Relationship with Raven: The Desire for Personal Freedom

Tilo's relationship with Raven, a Native American man, further deepens her identity crisis. Raven serves as a symbol of individual autonomy and self-definition, offering Tilo an alternative path—one that is free from the constraints of duty and tradition. As Tilo begins to develop feelings for Raven, she starts questioning the absoluteness of her Mistresshood. Her attraction to him symbolizes her longing to break free from the confinements of tradition and experience personal love and autonomy (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 152).

However, her attraction to Raven is not just about romantic desire; it represents her desire to redefine herself. Raven embodies:

- Freedom from imposed identities → Unlike Tilo, he is not bound by a predetermined role. He represents the possibility of choosing one's destiny.
- A connection to American identity → His Native American heritage parallels Tilo's cultural displacement, reinforcing the theme of hybrid identity.
- The rejection of rigid tradition → Through Raven, Tilo realizes that her identity does not have to be dictated solely by the Mistresshood—she can create a new identity that embraces both tradition and self-expression.

Her struggle with love and duty highlights the immigrant dilemma—how much of one's cultural past should be preserved, and how much should be redefined in a new environment?

Tilo's journey from Nayan Tara to 'The Mistress of Spices' is a metaphor for the evolution of identity in diasporic individuals. It is her multiple transformations that make the struggle for self-definition, cultural adaptation, and the struggle to reconcile duty with personal freedom. At the end of the novel, Tilo decides to break free of the Mistresshood and live her desires. This is a choice that signifies her acceptance of a hybrid identity, she is neither fully Indian nor entirely American, but a mixture of both. It is an expression of the immigrant reality, a reality of the struggle that immigrants have to constantly negotiate their identity, constantly negotiate the immigrant identity. True identity, in 'The Mistress of Spices,' is simply not about 'adhering to tradition'; it revolves around evolving, and changing.

Influence of the Past and Cultural Heritage on Self-Perception: An Expanded Analysis

Tilo's Connection to Cultural Heritage Through the Mistresshood

Tilo's past and her cultural heritage have shaped her self-perception, as a Mistress of Spices, she has a role and responsibilities to fulfill. Her education in the art of healing on the mystical island is not just an education but an indoctrination into a system of duty, sacrifice, and self-effacement. She learns that she is here to serve others, not herself, and that is consistent with the traditional Indian values of selflessness and communal responsibility (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 128).

The spices she controls symbolize more than just her mystical abilities—they are representations of ancestral wisdom passed down through generations. Each spice in the novel carries deep metaphorical weight:

- Turmeric → Healing, protection, and purification, commonly used in Indian rituals and medicine.
- Cardamom → Soothing pain and fostering clarity, representing comfort and nostalgia.
- Cinnamon → Rekindling passion and warmth, signifying emotional reconnection and personal longing (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 174).

These spices serve as a tangible link to her heritage, keeping her connected to the Indian traditions that shaped her identity. However, they also act as shackles, imposing limitations on her choices. She cannot use the spices freely for herself; instead, she must follow strict rules about how and when to wield their power. This reflects the broader immigrant experience, where cultural heritage can be both a source of strength and a restrictive force. Many immigrants carry their traditions, languages, and customs into new lands, finding solace in them. However, these very traditions can sometimes prevent full integration into a new society, causing an internal conflict between heritage and adaptation.

Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Identity and Tilo's Identity Shifts

Stuart Hall, in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), challenges the idea that identity is fixed or rooted solely in historical continuity. Instead, he argues that identity is shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary influences, making it a dynamic and ever-evolving process (Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, 1990, p. 225). Tilo's journey in the novel reflects Hall's theory of identity as a negotiation between the past and the present. Her transformation from Nayan Tara to Tilottama to Tilo is evidence that identity is not static but fluid—influenced by both her mystical Indian heritage and the new realities she encounters in America.

Her struggle is not simply between two places (India and America) but between:

1. The past (tradition, duty, sacred knowledge) → Her training as a Mistress, her belief in the

power of spices, and her adherence to ancestral wisdom.

2. The present (personal agency, individual desire, change) → Her experiences in Oakland, her interactions with immigrants, and her growing love for Raven, a man outside her cultural and mystical sphere.

Hall's concept suggests that identity must be constantly redefined, a realization that Tilo comes to by the end of the novel. She understands that while her cultural past will always be a part of her, it does not have to dictate her entire future.

Psychological Conflict Between Duty and Personal Desires

Tilo's Internal Struggle: The Burden of Tradition vs. Individual Freedom

Tilo's greatest internal struggle is the tension between duty and personal desire. As a Mistress of Spices, she has been trained to forsake personal attachments, as love and self-interest are seen as distractions from her sacred mission. This aligns with traditional Indian ideals of self-sacrifice, where personal happiness is often secondary to communal duty (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 190). However, as she spends more time in America, she begins to question whether complete detachment is either possible or desirable. Her exposure to the lives of Indian immigrants in Oakland—each struggling with cultural adaptation, discrimination, and self-definition—makes her realize that emotional engagement is not a weakness but a fundamental part of being human.

Her role as a Mistress becomes increasingly suffocating, and she begins to ask herself:

- Can duty and desire coexist, or must one always overpower the other?
- Is self-sacrifice a virtue, or is it an imposed burden?
- Can one honor cultural heritage while still pursuing personal freedom?

This internal turmoil aligns with Erik Erikson's concept of an identity crisis, as discussed in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). Erikson describes identity crises as moments when individuals struggle to reconcile conflicting aspects of themselves, often during times of great change or transition (Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 1968, p. 17). Tilo's journey is a psychological battle between the identity she was trained to embody and the identity she wants to create for herself.

Raven as a Symbol of Personal Freedom and Self-Discovery

Tilo's relationship with Raven, a Native American man, forces her to confront the possibility of defying the rules that have governed her life. He represents:

- An alternative way of living, one that embraces personal choice rather than imposed destiny.
- A rejection of rigidity, mirroring his struggles with cultural identity as a Native American living in modern America.
- An opportunity for love and emotional connection, something she has been taught to avoid.

Her attraction to Raven threatens the very foundation of her identity as a Mistress. Falling in love means breaking the sacred rules, yet denying her feelings means suppressing an essential part of herself.

This moment of crisis is pivotal in Tilo's self-discovery. It forces her to make a choice:

1. Remain a Mistress, tied to ancient traditions and external expectations.
2. Embrace her desires and forge a self-determined identity.

Her decision to choose herself rather than conform to a predetermined fate is a radical act of self-assertion. It signifies her acceptance that identity is not about blind obedience but about continuous evolution.

Tilo's Final Transformation: Acceptance of Self-Agency

Tilo decides to redefine herself by the end of the novel. She does not take on the Mistress role because she does not reject her cultural heritage, but because she knows that cultural traditions should not be a prison. It is a direct challenge to the idea that one's past determines one's future.

Her final act of embracing personal agency highlights three key takeaways:

1. Heritage should empower, not restrict → While Tilo respects the traditions she comes from, she realizes that they should not prevent her from living her own life.
2. Identity is fluid, not fixed → She understands that self-definition is an ongoing process, as emphasized by Stuart Hall's theory.
3. Personal fulfillment is just as important as duty → She learns that duty without self-love leads to emptiness, reinforcing Erikson's idea that self-actualization requires balancing external expectations with internal desires.

Tilo's transformation is a universal immigrant and displaced person's struggle: how much of the past to carry forward, how much to leave behind? Tilo's journey in *The Mistress of Spices* is a

profound exploration of cultural heritage, self-perception, and personal agency. In this way, her struggle between duty and desire can be read as a reflection of wider themes in diasporic literature, which requires individuals to always stray tradition from change. Finally, the novel posits that a person's true identity is not in melding into everything Western or being rooted in the past, but about a setting of two opposites. Tilo's last decision to take personal agency reaffirms that identity is not inherited, it is created.

Cultural Displacement and Alienation in "The Mistress of Spices"

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *'The Mistress of Spices'* (1997) is a novel that looks into the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States and their battles with cultural dislocation and alienation. The novel shows how immigrants struggle with the nostalgia for their homeland and how they try to integrate into the new society. Divakaruni uses spices symbolically and conflict between Indian and Western cultural frameworks to shed light on identity, belonging and adaptation. The novel is examined in terms of the experiences of the Indian immigrants, the representation of the cultural nostalgia and the process of adaptation, the spices as bridges between the cultures and the gaps between the Indian and Western values.

Experiences of Indian Immigrants in the Novel

The Mistress of Spices (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novel which explores the Indian immigrants experiences in the United States, their struggles with cultural displacement and alienation. The immigrants in the novel struggle with the nostalgia for their homeland and try to fit into the new society. The *Collected Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri*, ed. Jhumpa Lahiri (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006). Lahiri most places from India represent an image of Indian culture realized and fixed in the American soil, migrated and adapted, and sometimes branching out into conflicts between the Indian and Western cultural frameworks in her symbolic use of spices (sacred in India, mundane here), in her recurrent struggles for immigrant identities and their belonging to or rejection of the host culture. This section studies the experiences of Indian immigrants in the novel, represents the images of nostalgia and adaptation into another culture, shows the function of spices as a connecting factor between the cultures, and focuses on the conflict between the Indian and the Western values.

Representation of Cultural Nostalgia and Adaptation

A recurring theme in *'The Mistress of Spices'* is cultural nostalgia, where characters long for their homeland and the traditions they left behind. The spice shop serves as a cultural sanctuary where Indian immigrants seek comfort and connection. The presence of familiar spices, aromas, and rituals allows them to momentarily escape the alienation of their adopted country (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 45). However, adaptation to a new culture is portrayed as both necessary and painful. Geeta, for instance, fully embraces American values, pursuing higher education and making choices that align with her freedom rather than familial duty. While she sees this as empowerment, her grandfather perceives it as a loss of tradition (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 103). Tilo herself embodies this struggle—she clings to the ancient traditions of *'The Mistress of Spices'* while being increasingly drawn to modern American life. Her desire for personal relationships, especially with Raven, symbolizes the pull of adaptation, while her strict adherence to the rules of the Mistresshood represents the resistance to change (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 152). The novel illustrates that adaptation does not mean the complete abandonment of one's cultural roots. Instead, it presents a hybrid identity, where individuals selectively retain aspects of their heritage while integrating into their new environment.

The Role of Spices as Symbols of Cultural Connection and Estrangement in "The Mistress of Spices"

In *'The Mistress of Spices'*, spices act as potent symbols for the immigrant experience, being simultaneously balm to avoid forgetting one's roots, and an excruciating dose of estrangement. As bridges between the past and the present they mark the links connecting Indian immigrants to the homeland as also reminding them of the limits culture can place on them. As *'The Mistress of Spices'*, Tilo uses these mystical ingredients to help and guide the Indian diaspora, in reminding them of their spiritual, emotional, and cultural ties with their heritage. However, though the spices afford comfort and connection, they also begin to take on such meaning as a symbol of estrangement, indicating the difficulty of being fully integrated in a new cultural landscape. Each spice in the novel symbolizes something different in terms of cultural identity, personal struggle, and the immigrant experience.

Spices as Cultural Anchors: Preserving Tradition and Identity

The spices in Tilo's shop function as conduits of memory, heritage, and emotional sustenance for the immigrant community. Each spice carries ancestral significance, helping characters navigate their struggles while remaining tied to Indian traditions.

Turmeric: Healing, Protection, and Cultural Continuity

Turmeric is one of the most sacred and widely used spices in Indian culture, associated with healing, purification, and protection. In Indian households, turmeric is often applied to wounds and illnesses, incorporated into wedding ceremonies, and used in ritual purification.

- In the novel, Tilo offers turmeric to those who feel vulnerable, disconnected, or in need of healing (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 63).
- Turmeric represents the immigrant's longing for cultural continuity, providing a sense of security in an unfamiliar world.
- It also symbolizes resilience, reinforcing the idea that immigrants, despite hardships, can find strength in their traditions.

For many immigrants, holding onto traditional practices such as cooking with turmeric serves as a way to preserve their cultural identity, reinforcing their roots in an unfamiliar land.

Cinnamon: Love, Warmth, and Emotional Longing

Cinnamon is associated with love, warmth, and personal connection and is often used in Indian sweets and home remedies meant to provide comfort and well-being.

- In the novel, cinnamon represents the longing for intimacy and human connection.
- Tilo associates cinnamon with romantic love, which she yearns for but cannot embrace due to the restrictions of the Mistresshood (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 121).
- It also reflects the struggles of immigrants who seek companionship in a foreign land but feel torn between cultural expectations and personal desires.

Cinnamon highlights the emotional cost of assimilation, as many immigrants find themselves struggling to balance relationships and cultural obligations. For Tilo, cinnamon embodies her internal conflict—the desire for love versus the duty to tradition.

Fenugreek: Bitterness, Struggle, and Resilience

Fenugreek is a spice known for its bitterness, commonly used in Indian cuisine and Ayurvedic medicine. In the novel, it symbolizes hardship, resilience, and endurance—particularly in the context of racial prejudice and economic struggles faced by immigrants.

- Tilo gives fenugreek to customers who experience loneliness, isolation, or discrimination (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 140).
- It represents the bitterness of displacement—the painful realities that many immigrants endure while trying to establish themselves in a foreign land.
- Fenugreek also signifies strength and survival, mirroring the perseverance of immigrants who face adversity yet continue to hold onto their identity.

For characters like Haroun, the Kashmiri taxi driver, or Jagjit, the bullied Sikh boy, fenugreek reflects the harsh realities of racial discrimination and the resilience required to navigate life as an outsider.

Spices as Symbols of Cultural Estrangement

While the spices provide comfort and preserve cultural identity, they also serve as symbols of restriction and isolation. The paradox of cultural heritage—being deeply tied to tradition while struggling to integrate into a new society—is embodied in Tilo's relationship with the spices.

The Burden of Cultural Expectations

Tilo's deep connection to spices gives her power, but it also traps her in a rigid framework. As a Mistress of Spices, she must:

- Remain in the spice shop and not physically engage with the outside world.
- Refrain from personal desires and prioritize others' needs over her own.
- Follow strict mystical rules, preventing her from forming relationships or embracing modernity (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 150).

This reflects the immigrant's dilemma—holding onto one's heritage can sometimes become a limitation, preventing full participation in a new society.

Tilo's Internal Conflict: Tradition vs. Change

Tilo's struggle mirrors the experience of many immigrants, who:

- Feel deeply connected to their traditions but also desire personal freedom.
- Experience nostalgia for their homeland but also seek to build a new life in a different culture.
- Fear losing their cultural identity yet yearn for new opportunities and relationships.

Her strict adherence to the Mistresshood isolates her just as immigrants who refuse to adapt may

feel disconnected from their surroundings. This highlights the tension between cultural preservation and adaptation.

The Paradox of Spices: Comfort and Restriction

The dual nature of spices in the novel reflects the contradictions of the immigrant experience:

Symbolism of Spices	of	Connection to Cultural Identity	Representation of Estrangement
Turmeric	→	Offers emotional grounding in traditions	It can make immigrants feel trapped in nostalgia
Cinnamon	→	Represents personal connection and longing	Highlights the difficulty of balancing love and cultural expectations
Fenugreek	→	Reflects immigrant resilience and survival	Embodies the pain of alienation and discrimination

Through these spices, Divakaruni emphasizes the immigrant’s complex relationship with their cultural heritage—one that is both a source of strength and a barrier to belonging.

In *‘The Mistress of Spices’*, spices serve as more than just ingredients—they are vessels of memory, heritage, and identity. They offer comfort, connection, and healing, reinforcing the importance of tradition for displaced individuals. However, they also highlight the restrictive aspects of cultural heritage, illustrating the immigrant’s struggle to balance past and present, tradition and adaptation.

Tilo’s journey reflects the broader immigrant experience, demonstrating that:

1. Holding onto cultural roots provides emotional grounding but can also lead to isolation and estrangement.
2. Personal identity is shaped by a negotiation between tradition and adaptation.
3. Cultural heritage should be a source of empowerment, not restriction, allowing individuals to integrate without erasing their past.

Ultimately, Divakaruni suggests that true identity is not about abandoning one’s heritage, nor is it about rigidly clinging to it. Instead, it lies in the ability to blend the past and present, embracing both cultural memory and personal transformation.

Conflicts Between Indian and Western Cultural Frameworks in “The Mistress of Spices”

In *‘The Mistress of Spices’*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depicts tensions between Indian traditions and Western cultural values, when looking at family dynamics, the role of gender, romantic relationships and the individual autonomy. The narrative of these conflicting cultural expectations are depicted in the context of the difficulties first generation Indian immigrants face, as fraught with emotional and psychological consequences of cultural duality. A central theme of these conflicts concerns how one should preserve and at what point one should adapt a certain aspect of one’s cultural heritage to new environments. The novel shows this through different characters that identity is not static but rather it is always in the process of becoming, and is constantly being shaped by the negotiation of tradition and modernity.

Generational Conflict: Tradition vs. Modernity

The intergenerational relationships are one of the most prominent cultural tensions in the novel, and this is especially so in the case of Geeta and her grandfather. Their relationship is an example of the conflict between the values of older and younger immigrant generations in how they view adaptation.

- Geeta embodies the younger generation’s embrace of Western ideals—she is educated, independent, and refuses to conform to traditional gender roles. She chooses her romantic partner, rejecting the idea of arranged marriage and the need for parental approval in her personal decisions.
- Her grandfather represents the traditional Indian patriarch, rooted in familial honor, cultural preservation, and generational hierarchy. To him, Geeta’s choices signify a rejection of Indian customs, leading him to feel betrayed and disconnected from the younger generation (Divakaruni, *‘The Mistress of Spices’*, 1997, p. 104).

A struggle of this clash between traditional and modern values is the main struggle within immigrant families, where the older generations see adaptation as a loss of culture and the younger generations see adaptation as progress and empowerment.

The Broader Implications of Generational Conflict

Thus, Geeta's story is the same for all the other immigrant families whose parents and grand parents fear losing their heritage in foreign land. This tension, then, places an emotional and psychological stress upon people such that they are forced to choose between preserving their culture and asserting their personal freedom.

For many second-generation immigrants, the expectation to uphold traditional values while integrating into Western society creates an identity crisis, leading to:

1. Feelings of alienation from both cultures → Neither fully accepted in their parents' homeland nor completely belonging to the dominant Western culture.
2. Family tensions and generational misunderstandings → The struggle to meet parental expectations while asserting one's individuality.
3. A redefinition of cultural identity → Finding a middle ground between tradition and personal autonomy.

Divakaruni uses Geeta as a means of showing us how the intricacies of transformation within immigrant families are deeply rooted, as they anger and also liberate.

Romantic Relationships: Duty vs. Desire

Another major cultural conflict in the novel is the contrasting views on romantic relationships in Indian and Western societies. This is most evident in Tilo's attraction to Raven, which forces her to confront the clash between tradition and individual choice.

- Indian cultural norms emphasize arranged marriages, family approval, and duty to one's heritage. Marriage is seen as a union of families, not just individuals, and romantic love is often considered secondary to familial obligations.
- Western values promote personal choice, romantic love, and autonomy in relationships, where individual desires take precedence over societal expectations (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 190).

Tilo, as a Mistress of Spices, is expected to forsake romantic love altogether in service of her sacred duty. Her feelings for Raven, a Native American man, challenge not only her commitment to the Mistresshood but also her deeply ingrained cultural beliefs.

Tilo's Internal Conflict: Love vs. Tradition

Tilo's hesitation to embrace her love for Raven reflects the struggle of many immigrants, particularly women, who must navigate cultural expectations in relationships.

- Emotional vs. Cultural Identity → Tilo must decide whether to follow her heart or remain loyal to her traditional role.
- Cultural Boundaries in Love → Her relationship with Raven represents interracial and intercultural love, which is often discouraged in traditional Indian families due to concerns over heritage and social approval.
- Self-Redefinition Through Love → Choosing Raven means choosing personal agency, breaking free from predefined roles imposed by both her mystical training and her cultural background.

By the end of the novel, Tilo chooses love, signifying that cultural traditions should not limit personal freedom. Her decision highlights the evolving nature of immigrant identity, where individuals can honor their heritage while also making choices that align with their personal aspirations.

Community vs. Individualism: The Struggle for Autonomy

A fundamental cultural difference between Indian and Western societies lies in their contrasting values of collectivism vs. individualism.

- Indian culture emphasizes collectivism, where family, community, and social duty take precedence over personal desires. Individual choices are often expected to align with the greater good of the family or society.
- Western culture promotes individualism, where self-expression, independence, and personal happiness are prioritized over collective expectations (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 175).

The Impact of Collectivism on Immigrant Characters

Many of the immigrant characters in the novel struggle with this conflict, as they must decide between upholding tradition or embracing the freedoms of their new home.

- Jagjit, the Sikh boy, struggles with his cultural identity as a turban-wearing immigrant in an American school, where individuality is encouraged, but difference is often met with exclusion and bullying.
- Haroun, the taxi driver, comes from a community where duty to one's homeland is paramount, yet he must adapt to American economic pressures that prioritize individual success over collective well-being.

- Geeta, the modern Indian-American woman, represents the shift toward individualism, asserting her right to personal freedom despite family opposition.

Tilo's Final Decision: A Cultural Synthesis

Tilo's journey in the novel serves as a metaphor for the evolving identity of immigrants. Her struggle to balance her Indian heritage with her desires mirrors the real-life negotiations that many immigrants undergo in shaping their identity.

Her final decision to break free from the Mistresshood and live on her terms symbolizes:

1. The rejection of cultural absolutism → She realizes that tradition should not dictate her future.
2. The possibility of a hybrid identity → She embraces both her past and her new experiences, forging an identity that is neither wholly Indian nor wholly American, but a blend of both.
3. The empowerment of self-definition → She asserts that one's identity is not predetermined but can be reshaped through personal choices.

Divakaruni suggests that cultural identity is not about picking one extreme over another, but about finding a balance through Tilo's transformation. Ultimately, the novel suggests that individual autonomy and cultural heritage can concur so immigrants can enjoy their past while building a future to their liking.

The conflicts between Indian and Western cultural values in 'The Mistress of Spices' highlight the complexities of immigrant identity formation. Generational conflict, romantic dilemmas, or the tensions between community and individualism are presented in the novel in their emotional weight by it. It ends up being a hopeful message about Tilo's decision to define her path rather than being confined by it, despite honoring tradition. The novel suggests that it is not necessary to be entirely 'assimilated' or 'unassimilated' during her experience that cultural integration only involved combining both worlds into a new hybrid identity.

Cultural displacement and alienation are what make up the immigrant experience in 'The Mistress of Spices'. Divakaruni depicts a broad range of struggles that Indian immigrants have to endure, from racial discrimination to generational conflicts. Further, the novel also stresses cultural nostalgia and adaptation as it focalizes the ways immigrants vacillate between retaining their heritage and adopting their new land. Spices are powerful symbols of both of connection and disconnection, both of the not being fully outsiders or fully insiders, and so are powerful symbols of cultural identity. Finally, the personal relationships, family expectations, and self discovery are explored as a conflict between Indian and Western values.

Tilo's journey at the end of the novel reflects the reality of immigrants who get negotiating and adapting identity that is not static.

Women and the Immigrant Experience in 'The Mistress of Spices'

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Mistress of Spices' (1997) gives an impassioned account of the immigrant experience from a gender lens. Instead, the novel focuses on the ways in which Indian women battle in a foreign land against the overbearing cultural identity, autonomy and social expectation. Tilo's journey is a metaphor for the more general struggles of the immigrant woman who tries to reconcile tradition with modernity. This paper explores how the novel offers feminist perspectives, gender, race and migration are intersectional, as well as how immigrant women deal with struggles of preserving their identity whilst aspiring for autonomy.

Feminist Perspectives on Tilo's Journey in "The Mistress of Spices"

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Mistress of Spices' gender roles, identity, self sacrifice and agency in terms of the freedom in the context of culture, expectations, and patriarchal traditions are explored from a feminist perspective in relation to immigrant women. The change in Tilo from Nayan Tara, an exceptional village girl, to Tilotama, a disciple of the First Mother, and then to a Mistress of Spices reflects the changing roles of women in both traditional and modern societies. From a feminist point of view, her journey is a symbol of the weight of self sacrifice that women are made to bear in South Asian cultures, where they are generally expected to put communal duties before their own ambitions. Finally, Tilo's decision to break free from these constraints is in line with feminist ideals of self determination and personal agency.

Tilo as a Symbol of Women's Expected Self-Sacrifice

As a Mistress of Spices, Tilo is bound by strict rules that reinforce traditional gender expectations:

- She must remain confined within the spice shop.
- She must suppress all personal desires, including love, ambition, and individuality.
- She must dedicate herself entirely to serving others, prioritizing their needs over her own

(Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 33).

This mirrors the historical conditioning of women to assume roles of caregivers, nurturers, and self-sacrificing figures, a theme widely explored in feminist discourse. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), argues that women have historically been confined to roles of servitude, where their self-worth is defined by how much they give to others rather than their desires (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949, p. 273). Tilo's initial acceptance of the Mistresshood reflects this deeply ingrained patriarchal expectation. She is conditioned to believe that self-denial is a virtue, much like the traditional South Asian ideals of womanhood, where a woman's honor is often tied to her ability to sacrifice for her family and community.

Challenging Traditional Gender Roles

As the novel progresses, Tilo begins to challenge these rigid roles, questioning whether a life of servitude is truly fulfilling.

- Her attraction to Raven, a Native American man, symbolizes her longing for personal fulfillment—something she has been taught to reject (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 152).
- She begins to see herself as an individual rather than just a servant to others, mirroring the feminist ideal that women should be defined by their own choices rather than societal expectations.
- Her final act of choosing love and agency over tradition can be seen as a feminist reclaiming of self-identity.

In *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000), bell hooks argues that feminism is all about the right to self definition, the right of women to decide for themselves what they want to do without being defined by patriarchal roles (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*, 2000, p. 23).

This sentence indicates that when Tilo breaks free from Mistresshood and regains her autonomy, she demonstrates that one is truly empowered when able to define oneself. It is a profoundly feminist narrative, her story is an allegory for women resisting societal pressures and choosing their destinies.

Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and Migration

Tilo's story is based on gendered oppression, but her struggle is not just a woman's struggle, it is the struggle of a woman of colour, an immigrant, and a displaced person. This also demonstrates the idea of intersectionality, a term that Kimberlé Crenshaw coined in *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* (1989).

Intersectionality recognizes that oppression is not singular—instead, it is shaped by multiple overlapping identities, such as:

- Gender → Women face discrimination based on patriarchal norms.
- Race → Women of color experience additional racial prejudice and exclusion.
- Migration → Immigrant women often endure economic vulnerability, cultural alienation, and legal restrictions.

Tilo's experiences as a woman, an immigrant, and a woman of color in America place her at the crossroads of multiple forms of oppression, making her struggles multilayered and complex (Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, 1989, p. 149).

Lalita: Domestic Abuse and the Vulnerability of Immigrant Women

One of the most harrowing examples of intersectional oppression in the novel is the story of Lalita, a woman trapped in an abusive marriage.

- Lalita's husband exploits her isolation as an immigrant woman, knowing that she has no family or support system in America (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 85).
- Due to language barriers and economic dependence, she is unable to leave her abusive relationship, illustrating how immigrant women are disproportionately vulnerable to domestic violence.
- This reflects real-world challenges where immigration laws, economic instability, and cultural taboos make it difficult for women to escape abusive situations.

Lalita's situation aligns with Crenshaw's theory, which argues that gender discrimination cannot be separated from racial and cultural struggles—a woman of color faces a different, often harsher reality than white women due to structural inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 157).

Geeta: Generational Conflicts and the Struggle for Autonomy

Another example of intersectional oppression is seen in Geeta's conflict with her grandfather.

- Geeta is independent, career-focused, and rejects arranged marriage, choosing instead to

date a non-Indian man (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 102).

- Her autonomy is met with resistance from her family, particularly from her grandfather, who sees her choices as a betrayal of Indian cultural values.
- This highlights the generational and cultural struggles that many second-generation immigrant women face—they must balance their heritage with their aspirations, often feeling pressured to conform.

Geeta's story represents the double bind faced by many immigrant women of color:

1. If they embrace Western ideals of independence, they are seen as rejecting their culture.
2. If they conform to traditional values, they are denied personal freedom and agency.

This struggle reflects the broader feminist discourse on how cultural identity and gender expectations intersect, shaping the experiences of women of color in immigrant communities.

Tilo's Final Transformation: A Feminist Assertion of Self

Tilo's decision to abandon the Mistresshood at the end of the novel is a powerful feminist statement.

- She chooses herself over societal expectations, echoing the core feminist principle that women's identities should be self-determined.
- She rejects the idea that sacrifice is a woman's only purpose, breaking free from both mystical and cultural constraints.
- She embraces love on her terms, redefining what it means to be a South Asian woman in the diaspora.

By the end of the novel, Tilo embodies the feminist ideal of self-liberation, proving that tradition does not have to mean submission and that women can forge new identities that honor their heritage while also asserting their independence.

Tilo's journey in *The Mistress of Spices* is a feminist allegory, illustrating the complex struggles of immigrant women who must navigate gender expectations, cultural obligations, and racial barriers.

- Her story critiques patriarchal traditions, showing how women are often conditioned to sacrifice their autonomy.
- Through characters like Lalita and Geeta, the novel highlights the unique challenges faced by immigrant women of color, reinforcing Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality.
- Tilo's final act of self-definition is a feminist triumph, proving that women do not have to choose between tradition and independence—they can create their own identities.

Ultimately, *The Mistress of Spices* is a feminist exploration of agency, self-liberation, and cultural negotiation, offering a powerful message that women have the right to define their own lives, regardless of societal expectations.

Challenges of Immigrant Women in Preserving Identity While Seeking Autonomy

Cultural preservation versus autonomy is among such deadlocks that run through the novel. Through Tilo's spice shop, cultural heritage is a metaphor for a place where immigrants come to reconnect with their roots. Spices act as a bridge to their homeland, providing comfort and familiarity in an unfamiliar world (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 63). Keeping traditions, however, sheltering oneself from the world gives a feeling of belonging – but on the other hand, it holds you back. A lot of the women in the novel are trapped by the traditional expectations of their culture, which means they must give up their freedom to preserve their culture. For instance, Geeta's grandfather demands that she follow Indian customs while she grows to want to be more Westernized (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 104). This conflict is emblematic of Tilo's struggle. She respects the traditions of the Mistresshood deeply, but she starts to wonder if it is worth the personal sacrifices necessary to adhere to them strictly. Her final decision to leave the spice shop and embrace love is a radical act of self-liberation and an act of claiming her right to redefine herself on her terms (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 203). This theme is consistent with postcolonial feminist theory, which contends that women from former colonized countries have a specific challenge: to fight Western domination as well as the patriarchal structures of their own cultures (Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*, 1988, p. 62). In this sense, Tilo's story shows her double oppression—she needs to destroy the stereotype of the Indian heritage and be released from American marginalization—' *The Mistress of Spices*' is one of the deepest books about immigrant women, their journey of crossing the lines between gender, race, and migration. The novel critiques traditional gender roles and emphasizes the need for self-definition through Tilo's feminist awakening. At the same time, it points out the various struggles immigrant women go through, including a culturally motivated tension between preservation and personal autonomy. At the end of the novel, Tilo's choice to take her desires on board is a radical

act of self-empowerment. Despite tradition and external expectations, she takes a stand for women in all circumstances, particularly immigrant women, to determine their paths.

Narrative Style and Symbolism in “*The Mistress of Spices*”

Through its particular narrative style and symbolic elements, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is a very rich examination of immigrant identity, displacement, and cultural hybridity. The immigrant experience is portrayed through the use of magical realism in the novel, which uses spices as symbols that are both cultural bridges and barriers to assimilation. In addition, myth and folk are woven into personal mythic reality in the new land and then back again, depicting the tension between tradition and modernity in the lives of displaced people.

Use of Magical Realism in Portraying Displacement and Identity Formation in “The Mistress of Spices”

The Mistress of Spices has magical realism as a defining feature, which enables Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to incorporate mystical elements in the story and discuss real-world issues of migration, cultural displacement, and identity struggles. Divakaruni uses this genre to present the immigrant experience as both fantastical and highly emotional and to show the difficulties of self-definition in a foreign land. Tilo is the novel’s protagonist, trained in an ancient mystical tradition, in which spices possess supernatural properties that enable her to heal, guide, and influence the lives of others (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 22). But Tilo, with her mystical abilities, is confined to strict rules: she cannot use spices for personal gain, she can never leave her shop, and she cannot make personal attachments. These are magical constraints as metaphors to the immigration struggle, which traps the immigrants in cultural expectations, social pressures, and alienation from the new environment.

Magical Realism as a Metaphor for Immigrant Displacement

Magical realism is particularly effective in portraying the fragmented identity of immigrants, who exist between two worlds—their homeland and their adopted country.

- Tilo’s mystical role as a Mistress of Spices represents her deep-rooted connection to Indian traditions. Much like immigrants who hold onto their cultural heritage, she believes she must strictly adhere to the customs of her mystical lineage.
- Her life as an immigrant shopkeeper in Oakland, California, reflects the realities of assimilation and adaptation. Though she helps other immigrants adjust to their new lives, she remains trapped between tradition and transformation.

The book also speaks about the duality of her existence as both mystical and rooted in reality and that is also like the ‘third space’ of cultural hybridity as introduced by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994). According to Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 38), a diasporic person inhabits a liminal condition, moving between past and present, belonging and alienation. This liminal state is what puts Tilo into her identity crisis: she is neither wholly Indian nor wholly American, neither entirely human nor entirely magical. This eternal in-between reflects much of the immigrant’s life, where they live without really throwing off their origin or giving away their identity to embrace a new culture.

The Role of Spices as Magical and Cultural Anchors

Spices in the novel serve as both magical tools and cultural symbols, reinforcing the idea that tradition can be a source of both power and restriction.

- Turmeric, cinnamon, fenugreek, and other spices carry mystical abilities, but they also represent ancestral wisdom, emotional ties to the homeland, and the constraints of inherited customs.
- While spices give Tilo a sense of purpose, they also impose strict limitations, much like how cultural expectations often dictate an immigrant’s behavior and choices.
- Her struggle to obey the rules of Mistresshood parallels the internal conflicts of many immigrants, who must balance honoring tradition with embracing personal freedom (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 150).

This paradox—finding empowerment through tradition while feeling constrained by it—is central to the immigrant experience. For Tilo, her magical spices are both a source of identity and an obstacle to self-reinvention.

Magical Realism as a Reflection of Immigrant Alienation

Magical realism in *The Mistress of Spices* also serves to emphasize the alienation that many

immigrants experience. Unlike other characters in the novel, Tilo possesses extraordinary abilities, but she is still unable to fully control her destiny.

- Despite helping others navigate their struggles, Tilo remains isolated and emotionally distant.
- Her supernatural connection to spices makes her an outsider, much like how immigrants often feel alienated from both their native and adopted cultures.
- Her shop functions as a liminal space—a sanctuary where immigrants find comfort, yet also a prison that keeps Tilo confined.

Ultimately, this is a depiction of a magical yet powerless existence, the paradox of the immigrant experience, having a unique cultural identity but feeling displaced, having the knowledge and experience of both worlds but belonging to none. Revathi Rani, in her review, observes that *'The Mistress of Spices'* 'creates a link between the practical and the magical worlds, depicting the intricate realities of the immigrant experience through the prism of myth and fantasy' (Rani, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 2021, p. 2317). Hence, the fantastical elements of the novel are not mere additions but a narrative writing strategy for the description of the emotional and psychological tumult of migration.

Comparison with Other Works of Magical Realism

The use of magical realism to explore identity and displacement is not unique to *'The Mistress of Spices'*. Several other diasporic and postcolonial works employ magical realism to express the psychological depth of cultural hybridity and migration.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981)

- In *Midnight's Children*, the protagonist Saleem Sinai is born at the exact moment of India's independence, giving him magical telepathic abilities.
- His fragmented identity mirrors India's postcolonial struggles, just as Tilo's dual existence reflects the fractured identity of immigrants.
- Like Tilo's connection to spices, Saleem's telepathic connection to other children of midnight symbolizes a mystical link to his homeland.

Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989)

- In *Like Water for Chocolate*, food, and emotions are intertwined, much like how spices in *'The Mistress of Spices'* serve as conduits for memories, healing, and self-identity.
- Both novels use sensory experiences (taste, smell, and touch) to evoke nostalgia, longing, and personal transformation.
- Just as Tilo's spices influence others while restricting her autonomy, the protagonist in *Like Water for Chocolate* expresses her emotions through cooking yet remains confined by rigid family expectations.

These comparisons show that magical realism is particularly effective in stories of migration and cultural displacement, as it allows authors to externalize internal conflicts and depict identity crises in metaphorical ways.

Tilo's Final Transformation: From Magical Enforcer to Self-Defined Woman

By the end of the novel, Tilo breaks free from the Mistresshood, choosing to embrace love and autonomy over rigid tradition. Her final transformation signifies that identity is not preordained but self-created.

- She abandons her role as a Mistress, proving that cultural heritage should not be restrictive but fluid and adaptable.
- She asserts her right to personal happiness, much like immigrants who learn to integrate their past with their present.
- She moves beyond the mystical and into self-realization, illustrating that true empowerment comes from self-definition rather than adherence to external rules.

In this sense, magical realism not only portrays displacement and identity conflict but also provides a pathway to resolution. By embracing both her mystical past and her human desires, Tilo achieves a harmonious identity that is neither entirely Indian nor entirely American but uniquely her own.

Through its use of magical realism, *'The Mistress of Spices'* provides a deeply symbolic exploration of immigrant displacement and self-reinvention.

- The mystical elements represent cultural heritage, while Tilo's struggles reflect the emotional turmoil of migration.
- The spices serve as metaphors for tradition, restriction, and empowerment, illustrating the paradox of cultural preservation and adaptation.
- The novel's blending of reality and fantasy creates a powerful allegory for the fragmented,

hybrid identities of immigrants, emphasizing that identity is an ongoing negotiation between past and present.

Ultimately, Divakaruni's use of magical realism transforms the immigrant experience into a deeply poetic and metaphorical journey, showing that cultural identity is not something inherited or fixed but something that must be continuously redefined.

Symbolism of Spices: Bridges Between Cultures or Barriers to Assimilation in 'The Mistress of Spices'

Spices are highly symbolic devices in *'The Mistress of Spices'* as symbols of cultural identity, memory, and change of cultural context, all of which relate to key aspects of the immigrant experience. They serve as both bridges and barriers to cultural heritage, as the multi-faceted nature of cultural heritage itself is also represented by them; as a place that provides comfort and continuity as well as a place that reaffirms isolation and separation from a new world. The spice shop of Tilo is a microcosm of the immigrant community, a place where people who have been displaced find refuge in the familiar tastes and smells, using spices as a tangible connection to their homeland (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 45). Spices however also serve as cultural anchors, and at the same time as restrictions and expectations, which further reinforce the battle between tradition and change.

Spices as Bridges: Connecting Immigrants to Cultural Identity

For the Indian diaspora in the novel, spices function as a means of preserving cultural identity in an unfamiliar land. The sensory experience of spices—their aroma, taste, and ritualistic significance—connects immigrants to memories of home, ancestral traditions, and community values.

Each spice carries specific cultural meanings that reinforce the emotional and psychological ties of immigrants to their heritage.

Turmeric: Healing, Protection, and Cultural Memory

- Turmeric is deeply embedded in Indian traditions and is often used in Ayurvedic medicine, cooking, and religious rituals.
- In the novel, Tilo offers turmeric to those in need of healing and protection, reinforcing its association with nurturing, safety, and spiritual well-being (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 63).
- It symbolizes the resilience of cultural memory, ensuring that immigrants remain connected to their origins despite geographical displacement.

Turmeric, therefore, acts as a bridge between past and present, reminding immigrants of their heritage while offering psychological comfort in an unfamiliar land.

Cinnamon: Desire, Passion, and the Struggle Between Tradition and Change

- Cinnamon is linked to sensuality, warmth, and emotional connection.
- In the novel, it represents Tilo's suppressed desires, particularly her conflicted feelings for Raven (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 121).
- As Tilo struggles between her mystical obligations and her longings, cinnamon symbolizes the inner conflict that many immigrants experience when navigating personal freedom in a new cultural environment.

The presence of cinnamon suggests that immigrants while holding onto cultural values, must also negotiate personal autonomy in a changing world.

Fenugreek: Bitterness, Hardship, and the Immigrant Struggle

- Fenugreek has a bitter taste, symbolizing pain, endurance, and resilience.
- Tilo gives fenugreek to characters experiencing loss and hardship, reflecting the difficulties of immigrant adaptation (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 140).
- It represents the sacrifices immigrants make, as well as the emotional and economic struggles they endure while trying to establish themselves in a new country.

Fenugreek's duality—bitterness that ultimately strengthens the body—parallels the immigrant journey, where hardships lead to growth and self-discovery.

Spices as Barriers: Restricting Assimilation and Personal Freedom

While spices provide comfort and continuity, they also act as barriers, reinforcing cultural confinement and preventing full assimilation. For Tilo, her commitment to the Mistresshood and its rules mirrors the rigid expectations imposed on immigrants—the idea that one must remain loyal to tradition at all costs, even at the expense of individual desires.

Tilo's Restricted Identity: Trapped Between Heritage and Freedom

- The rules of the Mistresshood forbid her from engaging in personal relationships, leaving her shop, or using spices for personal benefit (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p.

150).

- This mirrors the immigrant dilemma—remaining faithful to one's roots while attempting to integrate into a new culture.
- Her magical connection to the spices ultimately isolates her, preventing her from fully embracing her human identity.

Just as immigrants may feel bound by cultural traditions, Tilo's strict adherence to the Mistresshood's rules hinders her ability to grow and evolve.

The Immigrant Paradox: Identity Crisis and Cultural Alienation

The tension between spices as cultural bridges and barriers reflects the broader immigrant paradox:

1. Cultural traditions provide a sense of belonging, yet they can also lead to exclusion and alienation.
2. Holding onto one's heritage can be empowering, but it can also prevent integration into a new society.
3. Identity is not static—immigrants must constantly renegotiate their relationship with tradition and modernity.

This paradox is at the heart of Tilo's journey—she is both deeply connected to her past and restricted by it.

Spices as Metaphors for Cultural Negotiation

Scholar Sharma highlights this dual role, stating that "*Spices serve as vessels of Indian heritage, anchoring characters to their roots, yet simultaneously limiting their ability to adapt*" (Sharma, *Cultural Review of Indian Diaspora Studies*, 2022, p. 67). This suggests that cultural preservation and adaptation are not mutually exclusive—rather, they must be balanced to create a sustainable identity. Tilo's final decision to break free from the Mistresshood symbolizes a reconciliation between tradition and self-definition. She realizes that spices (and by extension, cultural heritage) should not be a prison but a means of self-empowerment.

Comparative Literary Perspectives: Cultural Heritage as Both a Strength and a Limitation

Tilo's experience in *'The Mistress of Spices'* parallels themes explored in other literary works dealing with migration and cultural identity:

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

- In *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli struggles to reconcile his Bengali heritage with his American identity.
- Much like Tilo's connection to spices, Gogol's name (given by his parents) acts as both a bridge and a burden—a link to his heritage that also prevents him from fully assimilating.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

- In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai's telepathic powers symbolize the connection between India's past and present.
- Like Tilo's spices, his supernatural abilities allow him to understand the struggles of others while restricting his self-determination.

Both novels highlight the conflicted nature of cultural heritage—something that simultaneously empowers and constrains individuals navigating identity in a diasporic context.

Through its exploration of spices as both cultural bridges and barriers, *'The Mistress of Spices'* underscores the complexity of immigrant identity formation.

- Spices offer a connection to heritage, providing comfort and continuity in a foreign land.
- However, rigid adherence to tradition can restrict personal growth and integration, creating an internal identity conflict.
- Tilo's final choice to embrace love and personal freedom represents the possibility of a hybrid identity—one that honors the past while embracing the future.

Divakaruni's novel ultimately suggests that cultural heritage should not be a constraint but a source of empowerment. Identity, like spices, must be blended and adapted to create something new—an existence that is neither entirely rooted in the past nor completely absorbed by the present, but a fusion of both.

Interplay of Myth, Folklore, and Contemporary Realities

Using Indian mythology and folklore to enrich the realities of modern immigrant life, Divakaruni achieves her task with masterly ease. Tilo's journey is mythic in origin, the First Mother trains her, undergoes mystical initiation, and gains supernatural abilities (Divakaruni, *'The Mistress of Spices'*, 1997, p. 33). However, these elements of folklore put her in a legendary position. Still, she is placed

in a very contemporary setting, Oakland, California, where she must deal with real-world immigrant struggles. The interplay between the mythical and modern reflects the immigrant experience of bringing well-fashioned cultural myths and traditions into new realities. As per the mythological studies, folklore is a framework for self-definition especially for displaced people (Saxena, *Folklore in Indian Diaspora Literature*, 2021, p. 98). An example of this would be how able it is to talk to spices, for example, something very similar to the Hindu concept of shakti, the divine feminine power. In this sense, she is both a traditional Indian goddess-like figure and a modern struggling woman, as many immigrants are (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 190). Moreover, her transformation at the end of the novel also reflects the Cocoon of fire that Sita had to pass in the Ramayana to prove her purity. Unlike Sita, Tilo does not choose to conform to external expectations, but rather, redefine herself. The deviation from myth in this story indicates a modern feminist reinterpretation of myths, which offers a more autonomous and self-driven identity (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 203). If anything, *The Mistress of Spices* uses magical realism, symbolism, and folklore to paint a very complicated tale of immigrant life, identity crisis, and cultural adaptation. Spices fulfill both roles as both bridges and barriers between cultures and spices in Divakaruni's hands are used as her cultural bridges and barriers to assimilation, allowing her to represent the surreal and fragmented nature of displacement through magical realism. Plus, the intermingling of myth and reality raises issues about tension between tradition and modernity and immigrants struggle in trying to form new identities. By employing such narrative techniques, Divakaruni therefore articulates the warring selves of migration, the confrontation between the strength of cultural heritage and the threat of limitation. In the end, the novel manages to convey that identity is always evolving, and that tradition and change can act in concordance without compromising the other.

Critical Reception and Comparative Analysis of “*The Mistress of Spices*”

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) has been widely analyzed by scholars for its unique blend of magical realism, diasporic struggles, and cultural hybridity. The novel has received both praise and criticism for its portrayal of immigrant identity, feminist themes, and cultural assimilation. This section explores the critical reception of the novel, compares it with Divakaruni's other works on identity and migration, and highlights its similarities with other diasporic literature, particularly the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee.

Scholarly Interpretations of the Novel's Themes

Scholars have extensively explored the immigrant experience and identity crisis in *The Mistress of Spices*. The novel is often praised for its fusion of myth, folklore, and contemporary issues, allowing Divakaruni to depict the struggles of Indian immigrants in America through a magical-realist lens.

Positive Reception: Identity, Feminism, and Hybridity

The novel has also been criticized for depicting cultural displacement and its effect on the formation of female identity. Kritika Sharma states that Divakaruni presents the “struggles of first-generation Indian immigrants to reconcile their cultural heritage with the requirements of Western society” (Sharma, *Cultural Identity and Intergenerational Dynamics in Diaspora*, 2020, p. 1). The hybrid identity of the protagonist, Tilo, is portrayed in the fact that she is torn between her mystical Indian heritage and her evolving self in America (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 152). In addition, the novel has been praised by scholars for its feminist undertones; Tilo forcefully disrupts traditional gender roles. According to Sujita Subba, Divakaruni ‘gives her female characters agency and enables them to reclaim their self-worth despite cultural restrictions’ (Subba, *Trans-Cultural Conflicts in the First and Second Generation Immigrants*, 2020, p. 7).

Besides, the idea of hybridity presented by Homi K. Bhabha can also be applied to analyze the novel. According to Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 38), immigrants are in a ‘third space’ neither fully integrated into the host culture nor fully connected to the homeland. Tilo's dilemma is a good example of this concept as she is a Mistress and is bound to Indian traditions, but her relationship with Raven and American society draws her towards modernity (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 1997, p. 190).

Criticism: Cultural Exoticism and Overuse of Magical Realism

Even though the novel has merits, some scholars have argued that the novel romanticizes Indian culture. According to Meera Sharma, *The Mistress of Spices* “depends on cultural exoticism to the point of presenting India through a mystical and overly spiritualized lens” (Sharma, *Diasporic Literary Representations*, 2021, p. 67). By critiquing Divakaruni's use of magical realism, this critique urges a kind of realism that would consider India as a modern and developing country rather than a land of the past with some ancient wisdom and mysticism as portrayed by

Westerners.

Some other critics have denounced that magical realism sometimes drowns out the novel's focus on the real-world struggles of immigrants. The novel accurately reflects displacement and cultural nostalgia, but some critics think that the fantastic elements somewhat reduce social criticism (Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Narratives in Diaspora Literature*, 2019, p. 87).

Comparison with Other Works by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni on Identity and Migration

Themes of identity, migration, and women's agency in the context of the Indian diaspora are some of the most common emphases featured in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, particularly those that address questions of identity, migration, and agency. Her novels are about the struggles of Indian immigrants to deal with cultural hybridity, intergenerational conflict, and the struggle against tradition and modernity whether through magical realism, psychological introspection, and familial drama. Overall, although *The Mistress of Spices* functions as an unusual fusion of myth and magical realism, Divakaruni applies different narrative techniques in her other novels, *Queen of Dreams* and *Sister of My Heart*, in which she pursues similar issues of displacement and self-identity. This comparison illustrates Divakaruni's development of migration and identity and the varying ways of telling the immigrant's story.

1. Queen of Dreams (2004): Psychological Struggles of Cultural Hybridity

Plot and Themes

Queen of Dreams follows Rakhi, a second-generation Indian-American woman, as she struggles with her cultural identity, family legacy, and personal ambitions. The novel blends elements of realism and mysticism, particularly through Rakhi's mother, a dream interpreter, whose supernatural gift isolates her from both her family and community. Rakhi, much like Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices*, is caught between two cultural worlds—her Indian heritage and her American present—leading to an ongoing identity crisis.

- Cultural Hybridization → Rakhi's struggle with her Indian roots and American upbringing mirrors Tilo's conflict between tradition and personal freedom. Both women experience the tensions of cultural hybridity, as they attempt to reconcile inherited customs with contemporary realities (Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams*, 2004, p. 129).
- Generational Conflict → Just as *The Mistress of Spices* depicts intergenerational tensions between immigrants and their descendants, *Queen of Dreams* explores Rakhi's fraught relationship with her mother, who remains deeply connected to Indian mystical traditions. The disconnect between mother and daughter reflects broader immigrant struggles, where second-generation children often feel alienated from their ancestral past.
- Dreams vs. Reality → Unlike *The Mistress of Spices*, where spices serve as conduits of magic, *Queen of Dreams* uses dreams as a metaphor for memory, cultural legacy, and psychological struggle. Rakhi's mother's dream interpretation gift functions as both a blessing and a burden, much like Tilo's mystical abilities, reinforcing the theme of inherited knowledge that isolates rather than empowers (Subba, 2020, p. 9).

Narrative Approach: Magical Realism vs. Psychological Exploration

While *The Mistress of Spices* leans heavily on magical realism, *Queen of Dreams* takes a more introspective approach, focusing on the psychological turmoil of identity formation within an immigrant family. Tilo's world is mythical and metaphorical, whereas Rakhi's struggles are grounded in emotional realism, highlighting the different ways Divakaruni portrays migration and self-discovery.

Key Differences:

Aspect	'The Mistress of Spices'	Queen of Dreams
Main Character	Tilo (first-generation immigrant)	Rakhi (second-generation immigrant)
Use of Magical Realism	Strong, spices as mystical symbols	Subtle, dreams as metaphors for memory
Focus of Conflict	Duty vs. personal freedom	Family legacy vs. self-identity
Cultural Crisis	Torn between Indian mystical traditions and American independence	Struggles with mother's mystical heritage and her place in modern America
Narrative Style	Mythological, fable-like storytelling	Psychological, introspective narrative

2. Sister of My Heart (1999): Migration, Female Solidarity, and Tradition

Plot and Themes

Sister of My Heart follows the lives of Anju and Sudha, two cousins raised in India, as they navigate family expectations, migration, and personal aspirations. Their journeys take them from India to America, where they struggle with the weight of tradition, arranged marriages, and gender expectations.

- Intergenerational and Gendered Struggles → Like *The Mistress of Spices*, this novel explores how women's lives are shaped by cultural traditions. Anju and Sudha, like Tilo, must negotiate their roles as daughters, wives, and individuals, highlighting the intersection of gender and migration (Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*, 1999, p. 201).
- Familial Expectations vs. Personal Aspirations → Just as Tilo's mystical duties restrict her from pursuing love and personal agency, Anju and Sudha must grapple with familial expectations that often suppress their independence. Their struggles illustrate the burden of duty imposed on women, particularly in South Asian societies where honor and sacrifice are closely tied to a woman's identity.
- Love and Migration → While *The Mistress of Spices* focuses on Tilo's internal conflict regarding love and self-definition, *Sister of My Heart* explores how migration affects women's relationships and sense of belonging.

Narrative Approach: Female Solidarity vs. Individual Self-Discovery

Unlike *The Mistress of Spices*, which primarily follows Tilo's solitary journey, *Sister of My Heart* highlights female relationships and collective struggles, showing how women support each other while dealing with migration and identity formation.

Key Differences:

Aspect	<i>'The Mistress of Spices'</i>	<i>Sister of My Heart</i>
Main Character	Tilo (single protagonist)	Anju and Sudha (dual protagonists)
Use of Magical Realism	Strong	None (realist narrative)
Focus of Conflict	Individual self-discovery vs. duty	Family expectations vs. autonomy
Cultural Crisis	Indian mysticism vs. modern independence	Migration, arranged marriage, and gender roles
Narrative Style	Symbolic and mythological	Realistic and relationship-driven

3. Shared Themes in Divakaruni's Works

Despite their different narrative styles, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams*, and *Sister of My Heart* share several key themes, reinforcing Divakaruni's recurring focus on migration and identity:

1. The Burden of Cultural Expectations

All three novels highlight the weight of cultural tradition and how it affects women's autonomy. Whether through Tilo's Mistresshood, Rakhi's mother's legacy, or Anju and Sudha's familial expectations, the female protagonists must navigate societal norms that often limit their choices.

2. The Tension Between Tradition and Modernity

Divakaruni repeatedly portrays Indian women in transition, caught between ancestral customs and contemporary realities. Each protagonist must decide how much of the past to carry forward and how much to leave behind.

3. Migration and Self-Discovery

While some characters (like Tilo and Anju) migrate physically, others (like Rakhi) experience cultural migration within their communities. Migration, whether external or internal, acts as a catalyst for self-transformation.

Through these comparative works, it is clear that Divakaruni consistently returns to themes of displacement, tradition, and female agency, but with varying narrative approaches:

- In *The Mistress of Spices*, magical realism transforms identity formation into an allegorical, mystical experience.
- In *Queen of Dreams*, the focus is more psychological, exploring family trauma and generational conflicts.
- In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni highlights female relationships and the emotional impact of migration on women's lives.

While each novel presents unique storytelling techniques, they all reinforce the idea that immigrant identity is a process of continuous negotiation, shaped by history, family, and personal

choices.

Similarities with Other Diasporic Literature: *'The Mistress of Spices'* in Context

'The Mistress of Spices' by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is part and parcel of the great run of diasporic literature that includes works by Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and the rest who examine how to become someone other than yourself. Despite diverging from Lahiri and Mukherjee in the employment of magical realism, Divakaruni's novel is comparable in the themes of tension between tradition and assimilation, the quest for belonging, and the development of identity in the diaspora. A close reading of these thematic parallels will show that *'The Mistress of Spices'* is just one novel among others, which reflects how the discourse of diasporic identity is constructed and how the novel's treatment of these issues is different.

1. *'The Namesake' (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri: The Burden of Heritage and the Search for Belonging*
 Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* offers a realistic portrayal of the struggles of Indian immigrants, focusing on the conflict between cultural heritage and the desire for self-definition. The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, struggles with his Bengali roots and American upbringing, much like Tilo, who must navigate her mystical Indian past and her present life in America.

Thematic Parallels Between *'The Mistress of Spices'* and *The Namesake*

Theme	<i>'The Mistress of Spices'</i>	<i>The Namesake</i>
Cultural Alienation	Tilo, as an immigrant and mystical figure, feels disconnected from mainstream American life.	Gogol struggles with his Indian name, which he finds alienating in an American setting.
Identity Formation	Tilo transforms from Nayan Tara to Tilottama to Tilo, mirroring the evolving nature of immigrant identity.	Gogol changes his name and lifestyle, constantly negotiating between his Bengali heritage and American identity.
Parental and Cultural Expectations	Tilo is bound by the rules of the <i>Mistresshood</i> , which dictate her role in society.	Gogol's parents expect him to maintain Bengali traditions, even as he resists them.
Negotiation Between Past and Present	Tilo's relationship with Raven symbolizes her desire to step beyond cultural restrictions.	Gogol's relationships (especially with Maxine and Moushumi) reflect his shifting perspectives on cultural identity.

While both novels explore immigrant identity through personal transformation, *'The Mistress of Spices'* does so through the lens of magical realism, while *The Namesake* is grounded in realism. Lahiri's novel presents a nuanced psychological exploration of cultural assimilation, whereas Divakaruni's symbolic use of spices allows for a more metaphorical representation of immigrant struggles (Sharma, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, 2020, p. 4).

2. *Jasmine (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee: Reinvention and the Fluidity of Immigrant Identity*

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* follows the journey of a young Indian woman who immigrates to America and constantly reinvents herself, adopting new names and identities as she adapts to changing circumstances. Much like Tilo, Jasmine undergoes multiple transformations, highlighting the fluidity of immigrant identity and the ability of diasporic individuals to reshape their destinies.

Comparing Tilo and Jasmine: Reinvention in the Diaspora

Aspect	<i>'The Mistress of Spices'</i> (Tilo's Journey)	<i>Jasmine</i> (Jasmine's Journey)
Transformation and Identity	Tilo transitions from Nayan Tara to Tilottama to Tilo, struggling to define herself within cultural expectations.	Jasmine evolves from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane Ripplemeyer, embracing constant reinvention.
Women's Agency and Freedom	Tilo is restricted by tradition and mystical duties, limiting her autonomy.	Jasmine actively chooses reinvention, breaking away from the limitations of her past.

Relationship with Cultural Roots	Tilo is torn between her spiritual Indian heritage and modern independence.	Jasmine gradually detaches from her past, embracing a more fluid identity.
Symbolism of Change	Spices symbolize tradition and transformation, acting as both bridges and barriers.	Jasmine's names represent her changing identity and assimilation into new cultures.

While both protagonists undergo multiple reinventions, Jasmine is far more radical in her self-transformation, whereas Tilo remains deeply tied to cultural heritage. Mukherjee's novel emphasizes agency, survival, and personal reinvention, while Divakaruni explores the conflict between self-determination and cultural responsibility (Das, *Diasporic Literary Worlds*, 2016, p. 6).

3. "The Mistress of Spices" in the Broader Diasporic Literary Tradition

Beyond Lahiri and Mukherjee, *The Mistress of Spices* aligns with a larger tradition of diasporic literature, which explores themes of:

- Cultural nostalgia and adaptation (seen in works like V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*).
- The emotional cost of migration and belonging (as depicted in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*).
- Magical realism as a tool for depicting cultural hybridity (similar to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*).

While *The Mistress of Spices* is often classified alongside realist diasporic literature, its use of myth, symbolism, and magical elements distinguishes it from more conventional narratives of migration. *The Mistress of Spices* has been widely studied for its exploration of migration, identity, and cultural hybridity. While it shares key themes with Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, it stands apart due to its symbolic storytelling and use of magical realism.

Key Takeaways:

1. *The Mistress of Spices* and *The Namesake* → Both explore identity struggles and the conflict between cultural heritage and self-definition, but Divakaruni's novel is more metaphorical, while Lahiri's is a realist.
2. *The Mistress of Spices* and *Jasmine* → Both depict the transformation of immigrant women, but Jasmine is more radical in her reinventions, while Tilo remains tied to tradition.
3. Magical Realism vs. Realism → Unlike many diasporic novels that depict migration through realist storytelling, Divakaruni's novel employs magical realism to metaphorically explore immigrant identity formation.

Most critics see the novel as existing at the intersection of two approaches. While some believe the novel exoticizes Indian culture through an overuse of mysticism, others praise the novel's innovative mixture of the pageant of myth and diasporic studies. Ultimately, *The Mistress of Spices* enriches a burgeoning category of diasporic literature by offering a compelling account of tradition and the transformational experience of self-definition in the diasporic context.

Conclusion

The Mistress of Spices by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a unique contribution to diasporic literature in which the author manages to balance the imaginary with the themes of migration, identity, and cultural hybridity. The story's symbolism of the story and its uses of fixability and fantasy also makes it different from most realist novels such as Jhpma Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. The role of cultural heritage in its anchoring and constraining Tilo's transformation and self-discovery is tracked. Just like Gogol in *The Namesake*, Tilo is also struggling to make her own identity while being in a relationship with tradition. Likewise, she reinvents herself several times, but her transformation is not solely based on personal reinvention, as Jasmine does in *Jasmine*, but rather on cultural and mystical obligations. While some critics argue that the novel's mysticism mystifies Indian culture, others refer to the novel's approach to the immigrant struggle. Finally, *The Mistress of Spices* is one of the diasporic literary works that communicates the complexities of self-definition, nostalgic romanticization of the land of origin, and adaptation. Rather than focusing on the displacement of the immigrants on the outside, it shows that the immigrant experience is also displacement on the inside, between past and present, duty and desire, tradition and transformation.

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