

THE CINEMATIC ADAPTATION OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE MISTRESS OF SPICES

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Abstract: This paper endeavours to study award-winning writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's first full-length novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, that adopts a rather complex strategy for portraying diasporic identity, and elaborates on the success or failure (as analysed in the course of the paper) of the cinematic adaptation of the same. Named one of the best books of the 20th Century by the San Francisco Chronicle, the heroine Tilo provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience. The multi-dimensional themes of the novel primarily focus on the inner conflict between duty and love in Tilo's life and the issues relating to the survival of the immigrant Indians in America. However, the cinematic rendition of the novel by director Mayeda and the scriptwriter Chadha bears a different look altogether, leaving the audience with a clear understanding that the adaptation is the film makers' personal and political opinion not only about the novel but also about immigrant identity. Granted that in adaptation, a literal transposition of the novel is impossible, as diverse mediums of expressions are employed. However, in a successful cinematic adaptation of a literary text the resemblances have to be clearly distinguished. Unfortunately, *The Mistress of Spices* - the film - at times appears to be completely divorced from its original text. While the novel is beautifully reflects myriad shades of magical realist elements, the film prefers to ignore most of them, while also considerably minimising the ignoble reality of immigrant life that has been depicted in the novel. The film makers, rather, focus on a passionate love story, which brings together and blends together the East-West cultural dichotomies. At the end, the film leaves behind an aftertaste of a cosmetic display of Indian culture to impress the first world viewers. Yet, honestly enough, although Chadha and Berges' film omits issues of cultural conflicts and imbues the film with shallow exoticism, it successfully reflects a visually appealing amalgamation of the East and the West.

Keywords: Diaspora, identity, immigrants, spices, east, west, love, culture.

Writing must come out of what we know, what we feel...But ultimately it must transcend all that to reach across time and space and memory to touch those who have never – and who will never – live as we have lived. What else is literature for? Because if it is only the specifics of a culture we want to record, surely a sociologist or an anthropologist could do it better.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

(Excerpt from an interview as quoted by Lisa Lamor in her Journal Fractured Identity – The Jagged Path of Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Minnesota: Cornerstone, 2011.)

As a diasporic writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni narrates the diverse experiences of the Indian migrants in America in her second novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) in which she works upon the themes of cultural conflict, disintegration of identity, a sense of alienation and a tussle of the individuals to keep track of their roots while trying to assimilate the new

culture. Symbolically representing the struggles and inner turmoil faced by a population which has moved geographically, politically, socially and culturally from its homeland India, and is trying to come to terms with a new existence in an alien land, the novel can also be read and analysed using the concept of Diaspora. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo and the customers whom she tries to help are all trying to re-establish their ties with India with the help of an ancient heritage which they share in common. The spices and their mystery is a unique link which makes them reminisce about their common past with nostalgia.

The cinematic adaptation of this novel in 2005 by Paul Mayeda Berges and Gurinder Chadha attempts unsuccessfully to portray this cultural conflict so realistically conveyed in the novel. Beautiful but lifeless, poetic but unelevated, *The Mistress of Spices* represents a brave but flawed attempt at that most unforgiving of contemporary genres, magical realism. Tale of an exquisite young Indian woman, who oversteps the boundaries of her powers as a spice dispenser in San Francisco's Bay area, trades too much on the porcelain beauty of the lead actress, Ms Aishwarya Rai, and too little on the story's social and emotional undercurrents to bring off the whole fabrication. This paper sets out to analyse and thereby conclude that while the adaptation is the film makers' personal and political opinion not only about the novel but also about immigrant identity, the film at times appeared to be completely divorced from its original text. While the novel is replete with magical realist elements, the film prefers to ignore most of them. The film makers decided to highlight a love story, which brought together and merged the East West cultural dichotomy, while completely minimising the ignoble reality of immigrant life that was depicted in the novel.

The Mistress of Spices, a tale of oriental mysticism and intriguing magic realism, is told by Tilo, a young Indian woman confined in the body of an old woman and trained in the mysterious powers of spices. Her special skills and deep-rooted knowledge of the healing powers of spices lands her in Oakland, California where she uses it to help the local Indian community by opening a spice shop from which she administers spices as curatives. Tilo can read people's hearts and minds but it is a power that holds true only when she keeps herself at a distance, "not too far nor too near, in calm kindness poised." (Divakaruni, 55) However, Tilo is unable to keep herself at a distance, as she gets increasingly emotionally entangled with her customers, as they strive to fulfill the demands of their families, the age old clash of the East and the West, the heartless atrocities of racism, abusive husbands - all of the complexities of living in the modern world. Tilo was to cater only to the needs of the Indian community. But, in a turn of events that would eventually turn the course of her life and metamorphose her in more ways than one, Tilo finds herself losing her heart to an American man named Raven, and progressively giving rein to her erstwhile unfulfilled desires and new found unbridled passions. Her complex and passionate relationships with her customers and Raven lead her to overstep the boundaries laid down by her spice mistress vows, and finds herself trapped in a tumultuous struggle between the magic of the immortal and the vicissitudes of life in the real world. Vibrant, vivacious, headstrong and extremely courageous, Tilo is unforgettable and so is her story.

As already mentioned, the cinematic adaptation divorces itself from the original literary text. Divakaruni portrays the spice shop as age-old and dilapidated with the purpose of juxtaposing it as a stark contrast to the glitter of the "new land America" which "prides itself on being no older than a heartbeat" (Divakaruni, 4). However, the spice shop in the film bears the semblance of a cultural boutique, with shiny interiors and fashionable ethnic wares. All the film critics comment on the richness of the visuals. According to *The New York Times* review the film is "a one-dimensional, sometimes illogical film, but it's certainly good-looking. The Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai, a former Miss World, is exquisitely beautiful...And the photography often looks like an enticing food-magazine layout" (Gates, 15). The spices look extremely attractive and the colourful presentation is sure to captivate the fancy of the viewers. However, due to this ethereal and exotic portrayal, the household and mundane spices become unfamiliar and distant from the audience, in the film. The mystical powers that Divakaruni bestows to the spices are undoubtedly undermined by such glossy presentation of them in the cinematic adaptation.

The major appeal of the novel lies in the way Divakaruni has delineated the character of the protagonist Tilo and the myriads of shades that have been woven into her representation. The dichotomy between the inner and outer self of Tilo adds to the charm of her character and the metaphysical conflict within her as depicted by Divakaruni. At the behest of *The Old One*, the mystical teacher, Tilo along with the other girls had given up their "young bodies to take on age and ugliness and unending service" (Divakaruni, 40) after the completion of their training on the magical island. This transformation was imperative for the complete metamorphosis from *Nayantara* to *Tilottama*, as Divakaruni's work

reinforces. After her meeting with Raven, Tilo seems to be more conscious of her “ridged and freckled skin” and later in the novel, her desire to be transformed into a seductive and beautiful woman with the help of the magical spices for the consummation of her own desires seem so poignant and at the same time real in the novel. The celluloid representation, however, presents Tilo as a naturally attractive and beautiful young woman and thus robs the character of the different layers and renders her as a rounded character.

Another major protagonist of the novel Raven, is not a true American, but belongs to the marginalised groups and is the spiritual counterpart of Tilo in America. The identity crisis is beautifully portrayed by Divakaruni through the character of Raven. Raven’s mother had tried to shun her identity by running away from her own folks and puts in her best efforts to completely transform herself as an American and gradually started believing as one: ‘Maybe when she’d left them, run away ... when she’d cut and styled her hair, when she’d changed the shape of her eyebrows with tweezers and painted on a new mouth, when she’d given herself a name pretty and proper like she’d always wanted to have, it had been the same as dying’ (Divakaruni, 158). Raven comes to know of his and his mother’s true identity when his mother decides to visit her dying grandfather. After a long tussle with his inner self, he decides to accept his true Native American identity and rechristens himself as Raven, after the bird that he had seen on the deathbed of his great grandfather. The symbolic existence of the bird is greatly undermined in the film and so is the identity crisis of Raven. Tilo and Raven are the representatives of the different marginalised communities who resist the hegemony of the West in their own ways both having a past that they do not spontaneously share with anybody and both derive a strange power from their past lives. Through this inter-racial union of souls, the subalterns who have a shared consciousness of subjugation form an alliance to combat the cultural and racial hegemony of the West. Together they set out to find ‘the earthly paradise’ (Divakaruni, 315) which is symbolic of the triumph of Orientalism and a vehement assertion of the identity of the marginalised communities in America.

The film divests the character of the male protagonist of the deep internal conflicts and through the casting of the handsome Dylan McDermott, Doug is presented as a ‘white’ American who is drawn to Tilo merely because of her Indian beauty and charms. The intensity of the relationship between Tilo and Raven as depicted in the novel is reduced to a mere love relationship between an Indian and an American, who after resolving the basic East-West differences decide to consummate their passion for each other in a vivid erotic scene of making love on a bed of red chillies. The scene is definitely rich in cinematography and use of bright, vibrant hues but is devoid of the intense psychological depth that Divakaruni weaves into the relationship of Tilo and Raven. In the simplistic handling of the character and the relationship, Gurinder Chadha and Paul Mayeda Berges fail miserably to appropriately adapt the characters of the novels in cinema.

According to Stanley Fish ‘The politics of difference is what I mean by strong multiculturalism. It is strong because it values difference in and for itself rather than as a manifestation of something more basically constitutive. Whereas the boutique multiculturalists will accord a superficial respect to cultures...’ (Fish, 378). As we juxtapose the film and the novel, this is the primary difference that is bound to grip us. The novel is a sincere and diligent effort to depict multiculturalism whereas the film fancifully endorses multiculturalism through certain discrete episodes. The cosmetic exhibition of Indian culture in the film is directed to captivate the world viewers and allure them with the oriental glitz and glamour. The film rarely tries to subvert the stereotypes of the East as perceived by the West in contrast to the various episodes of the novel. The novel boldly presents and addresses the problems of the immigrants in an alien land. The problems of racial discrimination as depicted in the novel are comfortably avoided in the film as it might be a jolt to the Western viewers that the film tries to placate. Veena’s husband suffers at the hands of two American teenagers just because he is an Indian and they decide to bully him and physically assault him for being in their country. Later the lawyers prove that the entire brawl was started by the ‘filthy’ Indian and the Americans were only trying to protect themselves. Such issues find no mention in the film and thus fail to do justice to the novel which deals with the various problems of the immigrants so deftly.

Similarly the episode where Haroun is beaten up by the Americans and robbed of his meagre income of the day is just an example of the racial discrimination perpetrated on the immigrants. Tilo is greatly perturbed by the newspaper reports of the racial discrimination and has several visions too on this issue: ‘The man who finds his grocery windows smashed by rocks, picks up one to read the hate-note tied around it. Children sobbing outside their safe suburban home over their poisoned dog. Woman with her dupatta torn from her shoulders as she walks a city pavement, the teenagers speeding away in their car hooting laughter. The man who watches his charred motel, life’s earnings gone, the smoke curling in a

hieroglyph that reads arson...I know there are other stories, numerous beyond counting, unreported, unwritten, hanging bitter and brown as smog in America's air' (Divakaruni, 172-173). The film is not sensitive to the racial problems as the novel and deliberately chooses to be mute about this issue that has been so strongly addressed in the novel.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is often referred to as a modern fairy tale in which the real life is inextricably woven into the magical world. In her article, "Genre and Gender in the Cultural Reproduction of India as 'Wonder Tale'" Cristina Bacchilega states that *The Mistress of Spices* is a fine example of a contemporary tale of magic that engages the reader in folklore: 'Dissolving boundaries not only applies to globalization as a whole but also speaks directly to the building of coalitions between different yet equally stereotyped groups – for instance, in the novel, between Asian Indians and American Indians' (Bacchilega, 187). Tamara S Wagner suggests that authors often use 'food metaphors' as an attempt at self-orientalism: 'Food metaphors are among the most vexing clichés of post-colonial and diasporic fiction' (Wagner, 31). The magic realism of the novel through the metaphorical and symbolic presentation of the spices is unique and unparalleled. The spices in the novel are depicted as having paradoxical attributes such as, healing and punishing, creating and destroying, adorning and deforming, embalming and capable of inflicting pain. Divakaruni endows them with the ability to assume different powers in different situations. Spices and the magic realism associated with them are used as symbols of arms needed by the marginalised to combat the hegemony of the West.

The Spice Bazaar in the novel can be seen as the multicultural market providing an opportunity to the culturally marginalised group to propagate their culture and tradition. As the *Mistress of Spices*, Tilo bridges the gap between the tradition culinary skills of India and the fast food cosmopolitan culture of America. The spice shop can be seen as a microcosm of India and the spices are the spiritual ingredients that commence the healing process of the Western world. Spices oppose the Western consumerism and emerge as the Indian way of constructing the multicultural world in the postcolonial era. In the film the use of magic realism is completely absent and spices are presented as exotic and mystical but definitely not powerful. The film presents the spices with vibrant hues and glitter but devoid of all the connotations and the subversive power given to them by the author. Tilo's spice shop as depicted by Divakaruni is always buzzing with people where as an 'architect of the American dream' (Divakaruni, 28), Tilo uses the magical properties of the spices to bring relief to her customers. The myriad faces belonging to different sections of the American and the immigrant society visit the shop – the bougainvillea girls, Mohan, Haroun, Geetha's grandfather, Kwesi, Lalita, Jagjit and so on. The novel delineates the story of each individual with fervour and in the process addresses a burning issue of the work. Tilo's interaction with them brings out different shades in her character and enriches the plot of the novel: 'So many people on Saturday, it seems the walls must take a deep breath just to hold them in' (Divakaruni, 78). However, the film pathetically misses the riot of colours added by the visitors of the spice shop. The film thus emerges as a superficial inter-racial love story and any other attribute that might shift the attention of the audience from the glamour of the heroine or the passion of the love story is carefully avoided in the film.

Finally ending of the novel too differs from the way the film ends. In the novel after giving way to her physical and mental desires in her relationship with Raven, Tilo decides to be ready for the chastisement that might be perpetrated by the spices through 'Shampati's fire' for leaving the spices and the spice shop and thus disobeying the dictates of the 'Old One': "Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it is to be Indian. To be American. But where I am going – life or death, I do not know which – I will carry its brief aching sweetness" (Divakaruni, 292). The earthquake then follows, destroying everything and thus symbolic of the destruction of the established world order where the supremacy of the West prevails. Destruction becomes imperative in order to create a new world order which is in keeping with the Indian cycle of life – creation, preservation and destruction. Thus spices pave way for the creation of a new world before forsaking Tilo by creating the devastating earthquake. Together Tilo and Raven look for the 'earthly paradise', a dream world symbolising a utopian existence. However they realise that a new world can be created from the ruins of the devastated world: "Because there is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make back there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug-dust, the young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and waking in cells. Yes, in the hate in the fear" (Divakaruni, 315). Thus in this new world order Tilo, now bereft of the power of spices takes on a new name 'Maya': "Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day. I need a name like that, I who now have only myself to hold me up" (Divakaruni, 317). Thus the ending of the novel is optimistic, upholds

multiculturalism and envisions a world where the marginalised communities co-exist with the powerful people with their shared knowledge of ancient wisdom.

Compared to the metaphorical significance of the ending of Divakaruni's text, the ending of the film is extremely simplistic and flat. In the film after the cataclysm of the earthquake, Tilo is shown to continue as the mistress of spices in her shop on one hand and on the other pursue her personal life with Doug. The spices forgive Tilo as the First Mother pronounces that the spices would not leave her because Tilo has proved her devotion to them by resigning herself to the chastisement that the spices might perpetrate upon her for pursuing her own dreams and desires. The last scene is a colourful collage of certain episodes like Tilo reopening the door of the spice shop, the romantic walk of Tilo and Doug hand- in- hand along the river bank and finally Tilo and Doug making love on the red-chilli bed. The lilting melody of the background score taken from an old Hindi film adds to the romantic appeal of the passionate scene once again reinforcing the film as an idyllic love story. Nevertheless, the film endorses 'brand India' in Hollywood, flaunts Indian culture and ethnicity and displays the various facets of the diasporic community. Although Berges' and Chadha's film is devoid of the psychological and cultural conflict that is predominant in Divakaruni's novel, yet the film upholds the effortless amalgamation of and alliance with the East and the West.

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