

Between Two Worlds: The East-West Dichotomy in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

The East-West dichotomy is a philosophical idea that posits that the East and West have distinct ways of living and worldviews. The two worlds have their own ways of living. This portrays them as two contrasting poles, each with its own unique traits. This paper examines the East-West dichotomy in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), arguing that the novel constructs cultural difference and hybridity through the protagonist, Tilottama's negotiation of Indian traditions and modern American society. Tilo faces this struggle as she moves from India to America, where she undertakes the role of a Spice Mistress with mystical powers. Tilo strives to balance Indian traditions with American life by assisting her diverse immigrant customers. Her love represents the tension between these two worlds. The East-West dichotomy is not merely a binary but a complex, layered spectrum.

Keywords: East-West, spirituality, culture, identity, tradition, immigration, alienation

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning Indian-American author and poet. Her works have been published and widely translated. She is also the author of young adult fiction, including the trilogy *The Brotherhood of the Conch* (2003). Her work primarily focuses on the immigrant experience, cultural identity, and the challenges of blending cultures. Her works also explore themes of belonging, dislocation, and the entanglement between tradition and modernity. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an enchanting novel that intertwines magical realism with the immigrant experiences. The protagonist, Tilo, a woman from India, is trained in the ancient art of healing people with spices and magical spells, and migrates to America, where she runs a shop in a neighbourhood in California.

The novel's fusion of culture and fantasy explores themes of immigration, cultural identity, and societal conflict. At its core, the novel explores the immigrant's experience in a foreign land and their labour to maintain a sense of belonging as they adapt to a new culture,

society, and values, focusing on the emotional and psychological challenges of dislocation from one's homeland. Tilo struggles to live in a foreign land while preserving the holy traditions of her native land, India. "The word culture meant both 'a way of life' and the form of signification that circulates within a society" (William 3). Cultural identity is the novel's central theme, as Tilo is torn between the roles of a healer and a woman bound by the traditions of her homeland and her desire to fit into the American world she now inhabits. "Indian spices are used to bring flavor, aroma and good taste to our food. They have some properties which add a life force and transfer some spiritual vibrations also" (Patil et al. 2).

The spices in *The Mistress of Spices* are connected to Tilo's past and provide comfort in the unfamiliar land of Oakland. The shop is a fusion of cultures where Eastern and Western influences blend to create a hybrid identity for Tilo and her customers, whom she heals both physically and sensitively.

The East-West Dichotomy

In post-colonial and diasporic writings, the East-West dichotomy frequently examines identity, migration, belonging, and cultural hybridity. Tilo's experiences tension between Eastern spirituality and Western freedom, trapping her in a cycle of a hybrid identity. Cultural rather than environmental factors define the perceived difference between the East and West. As Kipling writes, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Kipling 1).

The 'East-West dichotomy' is a philosophical concept of ancient origin that claims the two cultural hemispheres, East and West, developed in diametrically opposed ways: one from the particular to the universal, and the other from the universal to the particular; the East is more inductive, while the West is more deductive. (Pattberg 1)

Eastern Essence and Spiritual Roots:

Tilo is born in India with the gift of prophecy and good luck, which marks the start of her spiritual journey. "They named ... Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye" (Divakaruni 7). After being kidnapped by pirates, she escapes with the help of sea serpents following a typhoon and then moves to a mystical island, "The island of spice" (Divakaruni 24), where she is named Tilottama, "spice of nourishment" (Divakaruni 5). She practices healing people in society with the aid of mystical spices and magical spells. Easterners believe in karma and dharma. "Dharma is a philosophy that encompasses both morality and ethics. It is the idea that living in accordance with one's Dharma leads to happiness and well-being... Karma refers to the deed, its effects, and its outcome" (Kumar 204, 205). Tilo is deeply rooted in traditional Eastern identity and practices Indian customs and spirituality. She believes her dharma means to serve people through discipline and selflessness. Tilo's spiritual growth involves healing, protecting, and transforming. According to her, even the spices are considered sacred, imbued with divine energy. She perceives spices as divine messengers, the shop as a healing place that preserves ancestral wisdom by restoring spiritual and emotional balance, and herself as a spiritual mediator between humankind and the universe. She chants the mantras to achieve healing with the aid of spices.

Completing her training and remembering the words of the First Mother, ““You are not important. No Mistress is. What is important is the store. And the spices”” (Divakaruni 5), she embraces a community-oriented approach where selfhood is not of importance, the Eastern path of self-sacrifice. As a spice mistress, she should suppress personal desires only to do well for others. Serving people is her karma, which means a sacred duty. She feels heavy to leave the Island and her First Mother, “Mother take back the power. Let me stay here with you. What satisfaction can be greater than to serve the one I love” (Divakaruni 57, 58). Her knowledge is firmly grounded in community benefit. This contrasts with the individualistic values she challenges in America as she teleports with Shampati’s fire.

Bridging the Worlds

Tilo runs a spice shop in Oakland, California, called “SPICE BAZAAR” (Divakaruni 4). She is tasked with adhering to three main rules of a Spice Mistress. One is “No going out” (Divakaruni 103). The second is not to touch anyone or give in to desire, ““When you begin to weave your own desires into your vision,’ the Old One told us, ‘the true seeing is taken from you. You grow confused, and the spices no longer obey you”” (Divakaruni 72). The last is, “Every penny... spend to be accounted for” (Divakaruni 103). She encounters various types of people with their own cultures and habits that challenge her rules. As a spice Mistress, Tilo’s role in America is complex. Cultural confusions and an identity crisis make her feel desolate. She is compelled to encounter Western cultural ideas through conversations with her customers. Although she is initially strong, she faces challenges in the land of Westerners. She heals both external and internal problems with Eastern spiritual remedies and mystical spices, such as cinnamon, cardamom, and saffron.

Customers who visit Tilo’s shop also face an East-West dichotomy, as most are immigrants from India. Some immigrants try to reconcile their Eastern identity with a Western one and vice versa. For instance, when Tilo asks one of her customers’ names, a lonely American first “hesitates, then says ‘my name is Raven.’ And traces a pattern on the floor with his toe ... I see that my American is embarrassed, a little, by his un-American name” (Divakaruni 163). This reveals hesitation about his identity, which may impact his relationship with the native. This cultural dynamic illustrates how the East-West divide oversimplifies the various ways people resist or question their cultural identities in an increasingly individualistic and materialistic world. East-West divisions affect the fluidity and blending of cultural exchange in the globalised world. Jagjit, a young boy, is one of her customers who visits the store with his mother and feels scared of being identified as an Easterner, as his friends already harass him at school. Tilo observes him from within and suggests a spice that is considered sacred in India,

And here is cinnamon, hollow dark bone that I tuck unseen in your turban just before you go. Cinnamon friend-maker, cinnamon *dalchini* warm-brown as skin, to find you someone who will take you by the hand, who will run with you and laugh with you and say See this is America, it’s not so bad... cinnamon destroyer of enemies to give you strength.... (Divakaruni 39, 40)

One of Tilo’s customers is Geeta’s grandfather, who worries about his granddaughter as she follows the Western lifestyle. Kipling believes in “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (Kipling, Ballad 1). He questions Tilo, “If a young girl should work late-

late in the office with other men and come home only after dark and sometimes in their car too? *Chee Chee*, back in Jamshedpur they would have smeared dung in our faces for that. And who would ever marry her" (Divakaruni 85). But it is quite common in Western countries. However, her grandfather is a complete paradox of these customs, as he is accustomed to Eastern culture. He wants her not to oversimplify the culture of the East. He finds comfort in sharing his emotions with Tilo, who is also an Easterner.

Tilo responds to him about his grievances, saying, "But dada, this is America after all, and even in India women are now working, no, even in Jamshedpur" (Divakaruni 85). This illustrates Western influences on Eastern culture, and even Tilo gradually comes to accept hybridity and explains it to Dada. Immigrants struggling to navigate between two worlds often suffer from cultural disorientation. Though Tilo accepts the hybrid, she also tries to give him a natural solution using her Eastern knowledge of spices and spirituality, "I gave him a bottle of *brahmi* oil to cool his system. 'Dada,' I say, 'you and I are old now, time for us to spend our time with our prayer beads and let the young ones run their life as they see best'" (Divakaruni 86).

In Eastern countries, spirituality is considered the primary duty of elders, who believe that divine happiness relies on it. "The Kingdom of Heaven is the highest state attainable by man. It is within us" (Radhakrishnan 13). In the West, spirituality is often linked to the purpose of life and personal development, whereas in the East, worshipping the Gods and praying are considered responsibilities. Providing spiritual remedies with the aid of mystical spices for Indian immigrants, Tilo comes to understand their situation and gradually slips from the rules given to her by First Mother as she heals others. In Eastern culture, the bride and groom's parents and elders stereotypically arrange their marriage. Elopement and love are taboos. However, the most welcoming aspect of living in Western countries is the freedom to express love. Tilo breaks two of her life's ties when she falls in love with Raven. Her spice mistress promise and her forefathers' Eastern way of life are the first two. Raven questions, "You believe love can cure the aching heart?" (Divakaruni 114). She trembles to answer him and takes asafoetida to restore balance in her life and body. As indigestion is a common problem in Eastern culture, asafoetida is utilised in many Eastern cuisines, including Indian, Middle Eastern and Asian. It has a mild ability to balance hormones.

Tilo styles herself in American fashion and leaves the shop to seek his company, while she admires herself respecting personal space. Yielding to desire, Tilo thinks to herself, "*Tilo have you gone crazy is this why you broke the rule of boundary and stepped into America. For this*" (Divakaruni 130). She wishes to diminish her motherly appearance and desires a youthful and energetic body with the help of mystical spices, saying, "I steel myself for the spices" (Divakaruni 182). Thinking to herself,

But now I must attire myself for America... All I know of American clothes is what I have seen customers wear. Glimpses of passers-by. I weave them together into a coat gray as the sky outside. A wisp of a blouse showing the neck. Dark pant legs. And an umbrella. (Divakaruni 127)

Raven takes Tilo to his house for some private time. He hopes she does not let her costumes or their issues go, at least until they return to the spice shop. Where her desire overcomes duty upon hearing his words, "Be happy, OK? At least until we come back"

(Divakaruni 196). Not only does Tilo consume alcohol, which Raven provides, but she also thinks, “When I drink (another Mistress rule I am breaking) the wine travels through me, cold and then hot, points of light that collect in the small space behind my lids, begin to flicker” (Divakaruni 197). The confusion begins with the adoption of a new culture, as evident in her confused actions.

Tilo's Transformation and Hybrid Identity

According to Vedic thought, Maya is a creative power or a force of rebirth that symbolises Tilo's rebirth into her new hybrid life and name. Tilo, although rooted in Eastern practices and spirituality, experiences personal space and freedom from her surrounding circumstances. She tries to balance both her identities. She does not reject either culture, but recognises that true spirituality does not disturb the self; instead, she nurtures love and desire alongside it. Although she embraces hybridity, she does not abandon her community-centred approach. According to Indian philosophy, Tilo... “affirms that the world is an illusion, an appearance, on the one hand; on the hand, it maintains the reality of the Atman (self) alone... In other words, the negative formula of Maya conveys a positive truth, that of the sole reality of the Atman” (Devanadan 12). Maya accepts her name from Tilo and says, “...it can mean many things. 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).

Tilo, after naming Maya, embraces love and personal growth as she practises her healing spirit. Her transformation shifts from personal denial to diasporic harmony, without deserting her spirituality. Tilo, as Maya, bridges the gap between the two cultures and integrates East and West through her hybrid identity. From Tilo's spiritual phase, the shop evolves into a diasporic space. The name symbolises the merging of worlds. The name Maya also represents illusion in Eastern philosophy and the rebirth of her Western individuality. Maya accepts her karma while exercising her free will and rationalises her behaviour rather than mysticism. As an Easterner, Tilo believes paradise is spiritually beyond the material world and duty-bound life, which is evident through her words,

I dream of the earthly paradise. The earthly paradise. The words spin me back to my volcano island with the sea furled green around it, the beckoning coconut fronds. Between my toes the warm grit of sand, the sharp silver glint of it in my eye, bringing tears if only I would allow. (Divakaruni 199)

Tilo's opinion quickly fades as she discovers a new meaning for the word paradise after meeting Raven. She finds paradise on Earth, separate from spirituality and mysticism and says to him, “I trust your intuition. And hey, if we go wrong, we'll just try again. We'll keep searching until we find our paradise, and enjoy each step of the way together” (Divakaruni 312). This emphasises the merging of Eastern philosophy with Western ideas, including the term paradise, which changes according to Tilo and Raven, but ultimately both blend, creating a hybrid identity for both.

Conclusion

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depicts the central character Tilo's diasporic journey through the framing of the East-West dichotomy, where tradition clashes with

modernity and spirituality intersects with materialism. The novel presents the idea that East and West are mutually exclusive binaries, suggesting that a hybrid identity is possible. *The Mistress of Spices* suggests that spiritual wisdom and personal freedom can intersect, a core concept of the East-West dichotomy. Through Tilo's shift, Divakaruni explores the tension between karma and desire, which are fundamental concepts in both Eastern and Western thought. The transformation of Tilo is not an act of deception, but a means of survival in a diasporic, multicultural world. Her transformation into Maya signifies an attraction towards modernity and her personal desire. The novel suggests that East and West can unite through adaptation and transformation. Even Kipling concludes his ballad with these lines, "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth" (Kipling 75). The blending of cultures and intersections of worlds are experienced through immigration, which is not about borders or divisions but rather an act of survival, combining the immigrants' roots with the cultures and practices of the foreign land.

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