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Tradition and Modernity in the Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni negotiates the relationship between Indian tradition and Western modernity in The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, Arranged Marriage and The Palace of Illusions. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, Stuart Hall's account of cultural identity and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminism, it argues that Divakaruni uses diasporic spaces, domestic relationships, culinary symbolism and mythological revision to construct a feminist negotiation of identity. Her women neither reject their cultural inheritance nor assimilate uncritically; instead, they reinterpret tradition in the light of their own desires, memories and experiences of migration. The paper concludes that Divakaruni presents identity as fluid and hybrid, and diaspora as a space not only of loss but also of female agency and self-fashioning

INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies a distinguished place in contemporary diasporic and feminist literature because her writings intricately explore the intersections of migration, gender, memory, mythology, identity, and cultural transformation. As an Indian-American writer shaped by the experiences of displacement and transnational existence, Divakaruni portrays the emotional and psychological complexities faced by immigrants who live between multiple cultural worlds. Her fiction reflects the anxieties, aspirations, and negotiations of diasporic communities attempting to preserve cultural roots while adapting to unfamiliar social environments. Through vivid narratives and emotionally layered characters, she presents migration not merely as geographical movement but as a profound process of identity reconstruction and cultural reorientation.

A significant aspect of Divakaruni's literary contribution lies in her representation of women's experiences within patriarchal and diasporic frameworks. Her female protagonists often struggle against restrictive social conventions, traditional gender expectations, and familial obligations that attempt to confine their individuality. At the same time, these women confront the challenges of displacement, loneliness, racial alienation, and cultural conflict in foreign spaces. Divakaruni's narratives therefore become sites of negotiation where women attempt to redefine themselves beyond inherited structures of duty and obedience. Her works foreground the emotional resilience of women who seek autonomy, self-expression, and personal freedom while simultaneously negotiating cultural continuity and belonging.

Divakaruni's fiction is particularly remarkable for its blending of realism with symbolism, mythology, and cultural memory. She frequently employs domestic spaces, culinary imagery, storytelling traditions, and mythological reinterpretations as narrative strategies to examine identity formation and cultural hybridity. Food, spices, rituals, and familial relationships function not only as markers of cultural heritage but also as symbolic mediums through which memory, emotional connection, and resistance are articulated. Similarly, her reworking of Indian myths and epics enables her to reinterpret traditional narratives from femini st perspectives, thereby challenging patriarchal assumptions embedded within cultural history. By reimagining mythological women as complex and self-aware individuals, Divakaruni creates alternative spaces for female agency and voice.

This paper argues that Divakaruni employs diasporic spaces, domestic relationships, culinary symbolism, and mythological re-visioning to construct a feminist negotiation of identity between Indian tradition and Western modernity. Through works such as The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, Arranged Marriage, and The Palace of Illusions, she portrays women who resist

patriarchal confinement and create hybrid identities shaped by memory, freedom, desire, and selfhood. Her narratives demonstrate that identity is not fixed, inherited, or culturally pure; instead, it is fluid and continuously reconstructed through migration, emotional struggle, and cultural adaptation. By portraying characters who inhabit multiple cultural locations simultaneously, Divakaruni highlights the complexities of belonging in a globalized world where identities are constantly negotiated and transformed.

The study draws upon postcolonial and feminist theoretical perspectives—Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" [1], Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity [2] and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminism [3]—to analyse Divakaruni's fiction in relation to diaspora, hybridity, and gendered subjectivity. These frameworks are discussed in detail in the next section.

Existing scholarship on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has largely focused on feminism, diaspora, mythology, or immigrant experience as separate thematic concerns [4–10]. Many critics examine her representation of women's oppression within patriarchal society, while others emphasize diasporic alienation and cultural displacement. However, comparatively few studies analyse how Divakaruni simultaneously negotiates tradition, modernity, hybridity, and feminist selfhood across multiple literary genres. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways her female protagonists reconstruct identity by selectively negotiating both Indian cultural traditions and Western modernity.

The present study attempts to address this gap by examining how Divakaruni's fiction transforms diasporic experience into a feminist space of cultural negotiation. The selected texts [11–14] represent different dimensions of her literary project: The Mistress of Spices explores immigrant hybridity and cultural memory; Sister of My Heart examines patriarchy and emotional sisterhood; Arranged Marriage critiques gender oppression within diasporic marriages; and The Palace of Illusions reinterprets mythology through feminist consciousness. By studying these works together, the paper demonstrates how Divakaruni consistently redefines identity as a dynamic process shaped by migration, gender, memory, and resistance.

Divakaruni's wider oeuvre, including The Vine of Desire, One Amazing Thing, Before We Visit the Goddess, The Forest of Enchantments, The Last Queen and Independence [15–20], extends these concerns to new settings, but lies beyond the scope of this paper except where it illuminates the selected texts.

Theoretical Framework: Diaspora and Hybridity

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the interconnected concepts of diaspora, hybridity, cultural identity, and postcolonial feminism, which together provide a comprehensive approach to understanding Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's representation of immigrant experience, gender relations, and cultural transformation. Divakaruni's fiction reflects the emotional and psychological complexities of migration and examines how identities are shaped through displacement, memory, negotiation, and resistance. Her works portray characters who exist between cultures and continuously attempt to reconcile inherited traditions with the demands of modern transnational life. In this context, theories of diaspora and hybridity become essential for analysing the formation of fragmented yet evolving identities within multicultural spaces.

The concept of diaspora forms the primary basis of this study. Diaspora refers not only to the physical movement of people away from their homeland but also to the emotional, psychological, and cultural experiences associated with displacement and migration. Diasporic individuals often experience a sense of alienation, nostalgia, rootlessness, and divided belonging as they attempt to adapt to a foreign culture while preserving connections to their native traditions. In diasporic literature, identity is therefore represented as fluid, unstable, and continuously negotiated rather than fixed within a single national or cultural framework. Divakaruni's fiction repeatedly explores this condition of "in-betweenness," where immigrant characters struggle to balance the values of their homeland with the realities of Western society.

Her works particularly focus on Indian immigrant women who encounter dual pressures: the need to preserve cultural traditions and the desire to achieve personal independence within modern social environments. Characters in works such as Arranged Marriage and Sister of My Heart experience emotional fragmentation because they are caught between family expectations, cultural memory, and individual aspirations. Migration in Divakaruni's fiction is therefore not merely geographical relocation; it becomes a transformative process that reshapes identity, relationships, and self-perception. Her diasporic narratives illustrate how displacement creates both cultural loss and opportunities for reinvention.

The concept of hybridity, developed primarily by Homi K. Bhabha, further strengthens the theoretical framework of this study. Bhabha argues that cultural identity is produced within a "Third Space," an intermediate and liminal space where cultures interact, negotiate, and transform one another. This theory rejects the idea of pure or fixed identities and instead emphasizes the emergence of hybrid identities created through cross-cultural encounters. The "Third Space" destabilizes traditional binaries such as East and West, colonizer and colonized, tradition and modernity, or self and other. It becomes a space of negotiation where new meanings and identities are constantly produced.

Divakaruni's protagonists frequently inhabit this hybrid cultural space. Her female characters neither completely reject Indian traditions nor entirely assimilate into Western culture. Instead, they negotiate between these worlds to construct identities that combine elements of both cultural systems. In The Mistress of Spices, for example, the protagonist Tilo embodies hybridity through her simultaneous connection to traditional Indian mysticism and modern American urban life. Similarly, in The Palace of Illusions, Divakaruni reinterprets mythological narratives from a modern feminist perspective, thereby creating a hybrid literary space where mythology and contemporary gender discourse intersect. Through such representations, Divakaruni demonstrates that identity emerges through negotiation, adaptation, and cultural interaction rather than through rigid adherence to tradition.

The study also incorporates Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, which views identity not as a fixed essence but as a process of "becoming." Hall argues that cultural identity is continuously shaped by history, memory, representation, and social experience. According to Hall, identity is never complete or stable; rather, it is constantly reconstructed in response to changing historical and cultural circumstances. This perspective is especially relevant to diasporic literature because immigrants often reconstruct their identities while negotiating memory, nostalgia, and adaptation to new social realities.

Divakaruni's fiction reflects Hall's understanding of identity as fluid and evolving. Her characters are deeply influenced by memories of homeland, family traditions, and cultural heritage, yet they also transform themselves through experiences of migration and cultural adaptation. The tension between remembering and reinventing becomes central to the emotional journeys of her protagonists. In works such as Before We Visit the Goddess [9,17], generational conflicts further illustrate how identity changes across time and space. Different generations of women negotiate cultural belonging differently, thereby demonstrating that identity is shaped not only by heritage but also by historical and personal experiences.

Another significant component of the theoretical framework is postcolonial feminist theory, particularly the ideas of Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Mohanty critiques universalized representations of women and emphasizes the importance of analysing gender within specific historical, cultural, and political contexts. Her approach highlights how systems of patriarchy, colonialism, race, class, and migration intersect to shape women's experiences. Mohanty's framework is particularly useful for examining Divakaruni's female protagonists because they experience multiple forms of marginalization simultaneously—as women, immigrants, and cultural outsiders.

Divakaruni's fiction consistently critiques patriarchal structures that restrict women's agency through expectations of marriage, domesticity, obedience, sacrifice, and cultural honour. Her narratives expose how women are often silenced within both traditional Indian society and modern Western environments. However, Divakaruni also portrays women as resilient individuals who resist oppression and attempt to redefine their identities on their own terms. Her protagonists challenge restrictive gender roles and seek emotional, intellectual, and economic independence. Through acts of resistance, storytelling, migration, and self-discovery, these women create alternative spaces of empowerment within diasporic contexts.

The integration of diaspora theory, hybridity, cultural identity theory, and postcolonial feminism enables this study to examine Divakaruni's fiction from multiple dimensions. These theoretical perspectives collectively demonstrate that identity in Divakaruni's works is dynamic, negotiated, and continuously evolving. Her narratives reveal that migration produces not only displacement and fragmentation but also possibilities for transformation and self-fashioning. By portraying women who inhabit hybrid cultural spaces and challenge patriarchal limitations, Divakaruni redefines identity as a process shaped by memory, migration, gender, and cultural negotiation. Thus, her fiction becomes an important literary space for understanding the complexities of diaspora, feminism, and transnational identity in the contemporary world.

Diasporic Identity and Cultural Hybridity in The Mistress of Spices

Published in 1997, The Mistress of Spices combines magical realism with diasporic experience to explore themes of migration, loneliness and identity formation. The novel centres on Tilo, a mystical spice mistress trained to use spices to heal immigrant

suffering. Through Tilo's experiences, Divakaruni demonstrates how diasporic identity emerges through negotiation between inherited tradition and modern desire.

The spice shop itself functions as a metaphorical "Third Space." It is neither entirely Indian nor completely American but a hybrid cultural zone where immigrants seek emotional comfort and cultural continuity. Tilo observes that the spices "speak" to human pain and memory, transforming ordinary objects into symbols of identity and survival. Turmeric, cinnamon and ginger become cultural markers connecting immigrants to the homeland they have physically left behind.

Divakaruni's use of sensory imagery reinforces nostalgia and displacement. The repeated descriptions of smell, colour and taste evoke what Stuart Hall describes as the diasporic longing for origins. Immigrant customers enter the spice shop carrying experiences of racism, domestic violence, alienation and intergenerational conflict. Jagjit's experience of racial bullying, for example, reflects the vulnerability of immigrant youth attempting to assimilate into American society while remaining tied to ethnic identity.

Tilo's relationship with Raven becomes central to the novel's feminist and diasporic concerns. Tilo is expected to suppress personal desire in obedience to tradition, yet her attraction to Raven destabilizes this rigid identity. Her struggle reflects the conflict between patriarchal duty and female selfhood. When Tilo chooses emotional authenticity over imposed restrictions, Divakaruni symbolically critiques systems that deny women individuality.

Critics such as Bharathi [21] interpret Tilo's transformation as a movement from cultural imprisonment towards hybrid selfhood. Rather than rejecting tradition completely, Tilo redefines it according to her own emotional needs. Divakaruni therefore suggests that cultural identity must evolve rather than remain rigidly preserved.

Female Friendship, Patriarchy and Emotional Resistance in Sister of My Heart

In Sister of My Heart (1999), Divakaruni examines patriarchy, marriage and female solidarity through the lives of Anju and Sudha. The novel foregrounds women's emotional experiences within traditional family structures and demonstrates how friendship becomes a form of resistance against patriarchal control.

The domestic environment of the novel initially appears nurturing, yet it is deeply shaped by gender expectations. Anju and Sudha are raised within a conservative Bengali household where marriage is treated as a woman's ultimate destiny. Divakaruni critiques this social structure through subtle characterization and emotional conflict. Sudha's marriage negotiations reveal how women's individuality is subordinated to family honour and social convention.

Anju's migration to America introduces another dimension of identity negotiation. Although the United States symbolizes modernity and freedom, Anju experiences profound loneliness and emotional alienation. Divakaruni therefore complicates the simplistic binary between East and West. Western modernity does not automatically liberate women; instead, migration produces psychological fragmentation and cultural uncertainty.

The relationship between Anju and Sudha becomes the emotional centre of the novel. Their bond challenges patriarchal structures that isolate women within marriage. Divakaruni portrays female friendship as a sustaining force capable of resisting social oppression. Sudha's refusal to abort her daughter despite family pressure represents a significant feminist assertion of agency.

Through lyrical prose and interior narration, Divakaruni emphasizes women's emotional subjectivity. Unlike traditional patriarchal narratives that reduce women to symbolic roles, the novel foregrounds women's fears, desires and intellectual reflections. Scholars such as Dixit [22] argue that Divakaruni transforms domestic experience into political commentary by revealing how family structures regulate female identity.

Marriage, Migration and Women's Agency in Arranged Marriage

The short story collection Arranged Marriage (1995) offers one of Divakaruni's most direct critiques of patriarchal marriage and immigrant isolation. Through realistic portrayals of Indian and Indian-American women, the collection examines how marriage can function simultaneously as emotional companionship and institutional control.

In stories such as "Clothes," "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" and "The Word Love," Divakaruni depicts women confronting emotional abuse, loneliness and cultural displacement. The protagonists frequently migrate to America after marriage expecting emotional fulfilment, only to encounter alienation and silence.

In "Clothes," Sumita initially accepts the traditional expectation that a wife must adapt herself entirely to her husband's life. However, after her husband's death, she begins to recognize the possibility of an independent identity. Her changing perception of clothing symbolizes psychological transformation. Traditional garments associated with obedience gradually give way to clothing representing self-determination and mobility.

Similarly, "The Word Love" explores the conflict between personal desire and cultural obligation. The protagonist's relationship with an American man places her between familial expectations and individual autonomy. Divakaruni uses interior monologue to reveal the emotional burden imposed by rigid cultural codes.

The collection consistently demonstrates that immigrant women experience double marginalization because they confront both racial alienation and patriarchal oppression. Yet Divakaruni does not portray women merely as victims. Her protagonists gradually develop self-awareness and resistance. Mohanty's feminist framework becomes relevant here because Divakaruni rejects stereotypes of passive Third World women and instead portrays women capable of negotiation, survival and transformation.

Critics such as Sushma [23] note that Divakaruni's "new woman" is defined not by rejection of culture but by the ability to reinterpret cultural values according to dignity and self-respect. This perspective is visible throughout the collection.

Myth, Revision and Feminist Voice in The Palace of Illusions

One of Divakaruni's most significant literary achievements is The Palace of Illusions (2008), a feminist retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. By rewriting a canonical epic through female consciousness, Divakaruni challenges patriarchal historical narratives and restores subjectivity to a marginalized female figure.

Traditional versions of the Mahabharata frequently represent Draupadi as symbolic rather than psychological. Divakaruni, however, transforms her into an intellectually complex narrator with desires, fears and ambitions. Draupadi states that she wishes to shape her own destiny rather than merely fulfil roles assigned by men. This narrative shift itself becomes a feminist intervention.

The novel critiques patriarchal power structures embedded within mythology. Draupadi's marriage to five husbands is portrayed not as divine destiny alone but as an emotional and psychological burden. Divakaruni foregrounds her frustration at being treated as an instrument of political alliance rather than an autonomous individual.

The infamous disrobing scene becomes especially important in the novel's feminist critique. Divakaruni presents the episode through Draupadi's internal consciousness, emphasizing humiliation, rage and injustice. Rather than functioning merely as a narrative catalyst for war, the scene exposes the violence of patriarchal systems that objectify women.

Divakaruni's revisionary strategy aligns with feminist literary criticism that seeks to reinterpret canonical texts from marginalized perspectives. Scholars such as Chakraborty [5] argue that the novel reclaims mythological space for female agency and challenges the exclusion of women's voices from cultural history.

At the same time, the novel remains relevant to contemporary readers because Draupadi's struggles mirror modern concerns about gender inequality, emotional suppression and female autonomy. Myth therefore becomes a medium through which Divakaruni connects ancient narratives with contemporary feminist discourse.

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

Across Divakaruni's fiction, the conflict between tradition and modernity is never represented as a simplistic opposition. Instead, her characters inhabit complex cultural spaces where they selectively negotiate values from both worlds.

Traditional Indian culture in her novels often provides emotional intimacy, family solidarity and cultural continuity. At the same time, it can also reinforce patriarchal expectations surrounding marriage, obedience and female sacrifice. Western modernity offers possibilities for independence and self-expression but may also produce alienation, isolation and fragmented identity.

Divakaruni's protagonists therefore seek balance rather than total rejection of either culture. Tilo redefines tradition through personal choice, Anju and Sudha preserve emotional bonds despite migration, and Draupadi questions patriarchal authority while remaining connected to cultural history.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is especially useful in understanding this process. Divakaruni's characters construct hybrid identities by combining cultural memory with adaptation. Their identities emerge through negotiation rather than fixed inheritance.

The author's repeated use of food, rituals, language and mythology reinforces the persistence of cultural memory within diasporic life. Yet these traditions are continually reinterpreted through contemporary experience. Divakaruni therefore suggests that culture survives not through rigid preservation but through transformation.

CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction occupies a significant position in contemporary diasporic and feminist literature because it explores the emotional, cultural, and psychological complexities of migration, gender, and identity. Through works such as The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, Arranged Marriage, and The Palace of Illusions, Divakaruni demonstrates how women negotiate patriarchal traditions, cultural displacement, and personal desire within hybrid transnational spaces.

This study has argued that Divakaruni transforms diasporic literature into a feminist space of cultural negotiation where identity is continuously reconstructed through memory, migration, resistance, and adaptation. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the analysis demonstrates that Divakaruni's protagonists inhabit "in-between" cultural locations where tradition and modernity coexist in tension rather than opposition.

Close readings of the selected texts reveal that Divakaruni neither romanticizes Indian tradition nor idealizes Western modernity. Instead, she portrays identity as a dynamic process shaped through negotiation between cultural inheritance and individual freedom. Tilo's rejection of ritual confinement, Anju and Sudha's emotional solidarity, the self-awakening of immigrant women in Arranged Marriage and Draupadi's reclaimed narrative voice collectively illustrate Divakaruni's feminist reimagining of selfhood.

Importantly, Divakaruni redefines diasporic identity not as cultural loss alone but as a transformative space for female agency and self-fashioning. Her fiction demonstrates that meaningful identity emerges through dialogue between past and present, homeland and migration, memory and reinvention. By combining mythology, domestic realism, cultural symbolism, and feminist consciousness, Divakaruni expands the possibilities of contemporary diasporic writing and challenges rigid binaries between tradition and modernity.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Divakaruni's literary contribution lies in her ability to transform women's emotional experiences into powerful narratives of resistance, hybridity, and self-definition. Through her nuanced portrayal of cultural negotiation, she creates alternative spaces where women reclaim voice, autonomy, and belonging within an increasingly transnational world.

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