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**Acculturation: An exploration of the novel The Mistress of Spices by Chitra**

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**Abstract:**

Culture is defined by the set of beliefs, customs, traditions, style of living and behaviour of a group of people living in a particular place. It has a great impact on the thought processes of the people and lays the very foundation of a person's individuality and identity. When a person moves to a different place, he or she has to get accustomed to the new culture either by choice or necessity or force. This process of adapting to the native culture of a place is acculturation. Acculturation happens due to migration, immigration, relocation or displacement. It can be both one sided and two sided. However, it becomes imperative for the non-native people who form the minority section to get acculturated to the dominant culture of the land for their living and survival.

The present research paper attempts to examine the dilemma, difficulties, stress faced by Indian immigrants in America and how they try to strike a balance between both the cultures with respect to the novel The Mistress of Spices by ChitraBannerjeeDivakaruni. The writer being an Indian settled in the United States of America and having got a first-hand experience of immigration poignantly describes the subtleties of acculturation through various characters in the novel. Through the protagonist Tilo, the writer brings out the concept of freedom and free will, the meeting of Indian tradition and American modernity and the subsequent changes tradition undergoes to enable her seamless acculturation into American society.

**Key words:** *Acculturation, immigration, culture, identity, freedom, free will*

## **Introduction:**

The word culture refers to the patterns of human life encompassing a gamut of behavioural norms, societal structures, values, morals, art, literature etc. It influences the thoughts, judgements and decisions of people living in a particular place. It is a shared value system that is passed down from generation to generation. According to the English anthropologist Edward B Tylor, “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (Primitive Culture, 1871).

Culture differs from place to place. Various customs and traditions that are acceptable in one society are not acceptable in the other. It also differs with respect to religion, caste, race, and time. Culture forms the identity of a person. Therefore, Geert Hofstede defines, “Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another.”

Culture is fluid in nature. It changes from time to time to suit the demands of the present. It modifies itself when people of different cultures come in close contact, influencing both the cultures. When people shift to a different place, it becomes imperative for them to adapt themselves to the culture of that particular place. This process of accommodating oneself to a new culture is called acculturation. Acculturation is defined as “the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 146). It is a process in which the non-native people try to make necessary changes in their style of living to make themselves a part of the land they have settled while retaining the core values, morals, principles and ethics of their native land. They strive to establish a balance between the two worlds - one for the sake of their survival and the other for the sake of their identity and individuality.

People travel to new places for various purposes such as education, jobs, recreation etc. Immigration is one of the major factors that leads to acculturation. Here, people settle in new places out of their own choice for the sake of their living. There are other social and political factors such as migration, displacement, relocation where people are forced to shift to new places for varied reasons. Nonetheless, in both the cases, the non-native people will have to adapt themselves to the culture of the land for their benefit. Acculturation can be one sided or two sided but the rate at which the native people get influenced by the non-native people is comparatively very less.

## **Acculturation in The Mistress of Spices:**

Chitra Baneerjee Divakaruni is an Indian based American writer known for her seminal works such as *The Palace of Illusions*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of my heart*, *Queen of Dreams* and several other collections of short stories and poems. Divakaruni was born in Kolkata, India and moved to the United States to pursue her higher education. As an Indian immigrant settled in America for the purpose of her career, Divakaruni brings out her personal experiences of the difficulties, trauma, identity crisis, and cultural assimilation in many of her works. She focuses on the plight of South-Asian immigrants, especially women, who try to establish a middle ground between the East and the West. Her novels have been translated into several languages and few of her works are adapted for movies.

*The Mistress of Spices* is an imaginative story of a mysterious young woman named Tilo possessing magical power. The writer uses the technique of magical realism to bridge the oriental world with the occident world. Tilo was born with special powers through which she could learn the secrets of other people. She used her powers to help needy people and gained popularity as well as respect in her small village. A group of pirates abducted her to make use of her powers but she finally lands on the island of spices - a strange place where young girls were taught to use spices to solve the problems of people. Tilo, being intelligent and rebellious, learns the secrets of the spices very quickly. Later, she turns into an traditional old woman and chooses Oakland, California to set up a shop to sell spices as well as help Indian immigrants to overcome their problems through her magical spices. Her shop becomes a destination for Indian immigrants to experience their native land. Tilo helps many of her customers to overcome their problems through the spices. However, Tilo has to lead a life of abstinence. She cannot fall in love, have desires, indulge in modern way of life and even step out of her shop. But, true to her rebellious nature, she goes out of her way to help a few of her customers. She also falls in love with an American and nourishes the desire to lead her life with him though she was aware of the consequences of doing so. Finally, Tilo finds the life she desires yet retains the special powers she had acquired.

The novel offers a dichotomy between the East and the West through Indian tradition and American modernity. The protagonist of the novel, Tilo is a free spirited, strong willed, adamant, rebellious and intelligent young girl. But, she is bound by the traditions of being a mistress of the spices and lacks the freedom to lead a life according to her will. She leads a life of self-restraint and tries to help her customers within the confinements of her powers. Nevertheless, she is a

woman with free-will who cannot be bound by restrictions for a long time. Even during her apprenticeship on the island of spices, she had violated many restrictions. She chose the name Tilottama for herself and insisted that she should be named so regardless of the caution of the first mother. Moreover, she chooses Oakland in California to set up her shop. But, the first mother, her mentor forgives her for she was intelligent, bold and one in whose hands the spices danced. Therefore warns cautions her against indulging in worldly pleasures before sending her to Oakland.

“Tilo my daughter,” said the Old One, and by her face I knew she felt my struggle in her own heart, “most gifted most troublesome most loved, Tilo traveling to America eager as an arrow, I have here something for you.” And from the folds of her clothing she removed it and placed it on my tongue, a slice of ginger root, wild island ada to give my heart steadfastness, to keep me strong in my vows.” (*The Mistress of Spices*, pg 45)

Tilo’s shop is mostly frequented by Indians who had settled in America for various reasons. She acts as a grandmotherly figure reflecting the traditions of the land they had left behind. The shop brings them nostalgic memories of their homeland. Therefore, they share their dilemmas, discomforts, the sense of alienation and Tilo helps them by giving the spices accordingly. She becomes a representation of the Indian culture and tradition while her heart yearned for something unconventional, exploring the new world she inhabited and experiencing life in its totality. When she meets the handsome looking Raven, she is attracted to his charisma and his mysteriousness and starts dreaming about a life with him. She goes out of the shop first to see the new cab bought by Haroun and then to meet Geeta and help her rejoin her parents. This crossing of the boundaries set up for her is similar to women crossing the boundaries set up by the patriarchal society. Through her revolutionary acts, Tilo slowly moves towards adopting the culture of America while still retaining the essence of her motherland through the spices. She gives herself to love being aware of the risk and the punishment she had to face. “For the first time I admit I am giving myself to love. Not the worship I offered the Old One, not the awe I felt for the spices. But human love, all tangled up, at once giving and demanding and pouting and ardent. It frightens me, the risk of it. And I see that the risk lies not in what I always feared, the anger of the spices, their desertion. The true risk is that I will somehow lose this Love.” (*The Mistress of Spices*, pg 183) Her decision comes at a great cost of the power of spices deserting her but she chooses her heart above traditions thus choosing the modern life of America with individual dreams, hopes, aspirations and free-will as against the restrictive life of a mistress.

There are several other characters who try to fight the dilemma of acculturation. Geeta is a young woman living with her parents and grandfather in America. Being grown up in the US, she finds her grandfather being too controlling and restrictive. Her grandfather finds her attitude, dress sense, thought process as against the culture of his native place and is very unhappy about it. He feels that Geeta's way of living is unbecoming of a woman from a respectable family. He complains about her to Tilo saying "That girl, this Sunday she cut her hair short-short so that even her neck is showing. I am telling her, Geeta what did you do, your hair is the essence of your womanhood. You know what she is replying?" (*The Mistress of Spices*, pg 68) Nonetheless, Geeta's parents are more broadminded than her grandfather. They don't object to her going around with her friends after work, buying expensive goods such as automobiles etc but when it comes to the issue of marriage, they still believe in the concept of marrying within the community. The years of living in the US only changed their attitude towards educating and allowing girls to take up jobs but not about choosing their life partner. So, when Geeta informs them about her boyfriend, they are highly disappointed. Her grandfather explains "But then he puts his fists down. I trusted you, he says. His voice, it is worse than hitting". (*The Mistress of Spices*, pg 72)

The case of Geeta shows exactly how acculturation works for three generations. Her grandfather is highly orthodox who wants to hold on to his beliefs and customs even though he is living in a country which is poles apart from his motherland. Geeta's parents, though modify their attitudes with the influence of the western culture, do not give up on their core values and thoughts while Geeta finds herself quite distinct from her parents. She cannot identify herself with the traditions and values that her parents follow. She finds the modern American culture more accommodating than her own culture. But, she manages to find the middle ground by staying with her friend Diana and not her boyfriend when she walks out of her house. The younger generation is more adaptable and readily acculturated to the new society whereas the older generation is rigid and inflexible which makes it difficult for them to get adjusted to the new world.

Lalita is another important character in the novel. She is a homemaker who is subjected to domestic violence by her husband Ahuja. She visits Tilo's shop to buy some spices and shares her problems with Tilo. Finally, she escapes from her predicament by using a helpline found in a magazine given by Tilo and starts her new life independently by setting up a tailoring shop of her own. This act of Lalita is pathbreaking for a traditional Indian woman as women were not expected to speak up for themselves or leave their husbands to begin a life of their own. Influenced by the society she was living in, she takes the courage to walk out of her marriage. This way, she liberates herself from the trauma of her married life and creates her own identity. She

writes in her letter to Tilo, “ I tell myself I deserve dignity, I deserve happiness. Mataji, pray for me that I will remain strong enough to find it.” (*The Mistress of Spices*, pg 227)

Haroun is a cab driver in America who tries hard to make it big in his life. Instead of acceptance, he gets bullied and beaten up for being an outsider. Jagjit, a Punjabi boy is often ridiculed and harassed by his classmates in the school for his looks, language and attitude. He turns out to be a rogue when Tilo’s spices work against him. Both Haroun and Jagjit are victims of racism and ethnicity who nurture anger and hatred for the local people for ill treating them. They are not accepted by American society though they try their best to fit into a culture that is not their own.

Similarly Raven belongs to the Red Indian tribe whose identity was hidden from him for a long time by his mother. While the immigrants were trying to create an identity for themselves in the foreign land, he was in search of his roots. He was trying to get acculturated into his native culture. He unveils his idea of an earthly heaven to Tilo, “ For that is what I see behind my closed lids. Red-barked sequoia and innocent blue eucalyptus, squirrels with their silk-brown eyes. A land to grow into, to be transformed by. Its winter of chill caves and smoky fires, its waterfall frozen into soundlessness. Its summers of gritty earth under our bare feet, under our bare backs as we make love in fields of wild poppies.” (*The Mistress of Spices*, pg 242) Thus, the writer weaves an intricate and engaging narrative of love, passion, desire, mysticism and immigrant trauma.

Many post-colonial writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, V.S. Naipul, Chinua Achebe, Bharti Mukherjee delicately bring out the consequences of acculturation in their works. In the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, we can analyse two generations of immigrants settled in the US. It is the story of a Bengali couple Ashok and Ashima who move to Massachusetts to start their new life. They practise traditional Bengali culture at home but their children Gogol and Sonia become restless with their dual identities. Gogol undergoes a kind of identity crisis as he is neither an American nor a Bengali. This confusion creates a rift with his parents; for instance “He is aware that his parents, and their friends, and the children of their friends, and all his own friends from high school, will never call him anything but Gogol.” (*The Namesake*, pg 103) The novel is an illustration of how younger generations who are born and brought up in a foreign land find themselves alienated from the culture of their motherland and the resultant crisis leads to undue suffering and pain. Acculturation can also be tormenting when people cannot identify themselves with any particular place or culture.

**Conclusion:**

The process of acculturation has become inevitable in the present global scenario. People travel to different places for various reasons and adapting to the new culture is necessary. This cultural exchange affects both the local people as well as the immigrants. People take in what is good in the other culture and change certain things that are no longer relevant. Acculturation can be beneficial when it is accepted graciously as in the case of Tilo and overwhelming when someone is rigid and defensive as in the case with Geetha's parents and grandfather. A fine blend of native culture and foreign culture can help a person to retain one's identity and also integrate into the society they are living in without much chaos. As Mikhail Gorbachev states, "Peace is not in unity in similarity but unity in diversity, in the comparison and conciliation of differences".

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