

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MISTRESS OF SPICES BY CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI AND CINEMATIC ADAPTATION OF FICTIONAL WORK BY PAUL
MAYEDABERGES AND GURINDAR CHADHA**

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Abstract

The Mistress of Spices (2005), the cinematic adaptation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel of the same name, is about exoticizing spices. Whereas Divakaruni's fictional work posits spices as an empowering agency for the Indian community in America, in the film they are used as self-orientalising devices. We do not intend to decry the film on the basis of its being an unfaithful transposition of the fictional plot, but are interested to see how it deals with the issue of cultural conflict as depicted in the novel. Our main contention in this paper is that the novel propounds deep rooted multiculturalism, while its cinematic adaptation is preoccupied with exhibiting spices, which symbolize India and the Indian immigrant community, superficially, a phenomenon that Stanley Fish calls "boutique multiculturalism".

Keynotes- Cinematic adaptation, Indian community, Multiculturalism, Indian immigrant community, Boutique multiculturalism

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diasporic writer, narrativizing the immigrant Indian experience in America. The Mistress of Spices is her second work of fiction, in which she focuses on the themes of cultural conflict, alienation and assimilation faced by the Indian immigrant community in America. She employs the magical realist technique to comment on racism in multi-ethnic America. She endows magical properties to spices, an everyday, mundane commodity largely imported from India. The protagonist, Tilo, is the owner of a spice store in San Francisco who, over the course of the novel, reveals herself to be a healer performing magic through spices.

Divakaruni's corpus of works, including the present novel, instates her as a mouthpiece of the South Asian diasporic community in America. Yet another artist of great repute hailing from the same community (the diasporic Indian sorority) and voicing similar concerns is the film maker and script writer Gurinder Chadha. She is a British national who traces her origins to India. She has an interesting oeuvre of films dealing with diasporic Indian experience wherein she captures the trials and tribulations of being Non Resident Indian. However, her portrayal of India and the Indians in The Mistress of Spices is strategically essentialist.

By and large, she adheres to the stereotype of the East produced in and perceived by the West, rarely subverting these stereotypes. In the film under discussion, Chadha has created a beautiful, interracial love story set against the multicultural, cosmopolitan backdrop of America. But, nonetheless, in doing so the director Mayeda and the scriptwriter Chadha overlook the spiritual and political angles of the source novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Many uncomfortable issues, such as racial discrimination and related problems faced by the Indian immigrant community in the US, which are boldly foregrounded in the novel, are hardly addressed in the film. We would like to contend that this is a product of the flirtatious alliance of the marginal culture with the mainstream culture of America. Nevertheless, despite the fact that it propounds "boutique multiculturalism," this film is a significant work of art dwelling in the interstices of not only two major cultures but also two representative cinematic genres— Hollywood and Bollywood respectively.

It looks into the changing relationship of a community vis-à-vis its land of origin and its land of settlement. Theorizing South Asian diasporic cinema, Jigna Desai aptly points out that this genre produces new identities, adhering to both the country of origin and the country of immigration. She

maintains that: South Asian diasporic films function significantly as part of the shifting economic, political, and cultural relations between global capitalism and the postcolonial nation-state, raising questions regarding the negotiation of cultural politics of diasporas located within local, national, and transnational process. (35)

The film under discussion does perform this important function, as it analyses the cultural politics influencing the Indian immigrant community, though not as profoundly as the novel. Desai goes on to discuss that South Asian diasporic films can be situated within the broader canon of “national cinemas that are nation- building projects” (36). This can be said to be true of the British filmmakers’ *The Mistress of Spices*.

The film has the aesthetics of the Bollywood genre, the most distinguishable being the music track, whereas politically, the film aims at the integration of the migrant subject into the American mainstream—creating an individual consent towards the nationalistic collective, which is Hollywood’s favourite trope. This film, like several “ethnic films” in America, defies easy classification—it is neither Hollywood nor Bollywood.

In her article about the Asian American film experience, Somdatta Mandal discusses a wide range of films produced/directed by Asian-American filmmakers and states that, despite these films and filmmakers facing categorical confusion as to whether they should be associated either with mainstream Hollywood or with the avant-garde, the reigning fact is that “those who are interested in Asian American Cinema are interested in Asian American perspectives” (130).

Nevertheless, Chadha and Berges’ attempt at filming this novel which narrativizes the diasporic experience underscores their intentions as filmmakers. We can construe that the adaptation is their personal/political opinion not only about the novel, but also about immigrant identity. We agree with the majority of scholars that a literal transposition of the novel into film is impossible, as different mediums of expression are employed. We also agree with their contention that the film is an interpretation of the novel.

After watching the film, we can easily discern the filmmakers’ underlying intentionality in the “additions” and “subtractions” that have been made vis-à-vis the ‘original text’, i.e., the novel. For instance, though Divakaruni’s novel has magical realistic elements, the film prefers to ignore most of them. Thus it does not fully ascribe to the fantasy genre of digitally driven Hollywood. Also, the film considerably minimizes the sordid reality of immigrant/migrant life that is depicted in the novel; instead, it chooses to highlight a love story, which merges the East-West cultural dichotomy. In spite of the fact that it advocates an easy commingling of cultural differences, which is symptomatic of boutique multiculturalism, and despite its essentialist portrayal of spices and Tilo, the film strategically encompasses the Indian diasporic community within its protective fold and thus empowers them in their new homeland. Stanley Fish has juxtaposed deep rooted multiculturalism with a significantly more superficial counterpart, i.e., “boutique” multiculturalism and has shown that a dichotomy exists between the two. To quote 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 multiculturalist will accord a superficial respect to cultures . . . ” (378). This is the fundamental difference we find between the novel and the film. The novel is strongly multicultural, while the film endorses multiculturalism meretriciously. We argue that an in-depth knowledge of cultures can produce a complex text like Divakaruni’s novel, while the film is, at its best, a cultural carnival, albeit a shallow one. There is a cosmetic exhibition of Indian culture in order to allure first world viewers, while the source novel does not resort to any such cultural eulogy. The cultural conflict which the characters face is not resolved easily in the novel but, needless to say, the film portrays an effortless

resolution of cultural differences.

The novel exploits the trope of magic realism as a political device. In the hands of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, spices and magic become forms of alternate realism. According to Faris, one of the important features of magical realist texts is that a familiar incident or object is endowed with magic. Thus, associating a mundane commodity with magic makes it all the more fascinating. As we know, there is no distinction between magical and medicinal values of spices in the novel; both the 'real' and 'magical' attributes of the spices are depicted familiarly, with minute details. In the novel (and the film) Tilo deploys clove and cardamom to help Jagjit in his friendless state:

Crushed clove and cardamom, Jagjit, to make your breath fragrant. Cardamom which I will scatter tonight on the wind for you. North wind carrying them to open your teacher's unseeing. And also sweet pungent clove, lavang, spice of compassion. (39)

Thus, Divakaruni conflates the medicinal and everyday use of clove and cardamom with their magical capacity to evoke compassion. She almost seamlessly merges a familiar truth with an unfamiliar one. As Faris maintains, defamiliarization is "the natural or artless recounting of wonders, largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, so that they are accepted, presumably, as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection" (169). Whilst Faris classifies the magical realist technique as a post-modernist device, Divakaruni argues that the technique she uses in the novel is her own version of realism, as opposed to the established one. As the author comments in an interview, "I've always been interested in alternate realities and believe that we live in a world where many realities are nestled one within the other."² She has endowed the spices with the power to heal and harm, to please and to punish, to create and destroy and even reorganise the world order.

It is striking, if not in fact disappointing, that the film has cut short the spices' scope for magic and that most of the time we are presented with Tilo indulging in a monologue in her shop, in lieu of the dialogue that takes place in the novel. The other objects with which magic is associated in the novel are Tilo's constant companions, the serpents. However, they do not even make an appearance in the film. Hence, we feel that the film fails miserably in its portrayal of magical realism. The device of magic realism, which Divakaruni suggests is symptomatic of alternate realism, is compromised in the film due to its ornamental use. Magical elements in the film are very few and they merely exoticize India. Almost all the reviews of the film comment on its rich visuals. The New York Times reviewed it as "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). The superb mise en scene of colourful heaps of spices, garlanded red peppers, bottled potions, and jarred condiments captivates the audience's fancy.

Spices never looked so attractive. The mundane spices attain some amount of defamiliarisation due to their exoticised depiction. The camera work foregrounds the mystical powers these spices show later in the movie. The spice shop looks like a cultural boutique with shiny interiors and fashionable ethnic wares. But this aesthetic display of the spice shop in the film is a far cry from the cobwebbed, dark dingy store of Divakaruni's novel, which she describes thus: "Grease- smudged window. Looped letters that say SPICE BAZAAR faded into a dried- mud brown. Inside, walls veined with cobwebs where hang discoloured pictures of the gods, their sad shadow eyes. Metal bins with the shine long gone from them

. . . And in the corners accumulated among dustballs, exhaled by those who have entered here, the desires" (4). As discussed earlier, the film is a boutique multiculturalist project and the glittering shop of the film substantiates this claim. Another important point to be noted is the marked difference

in the age of the protagonist as depicted in the adapted work. Tilo, the mistress of spices, is shown in the film sans wrinkles, sans grey hair, as an unblemished beauty. In the novel, Tilo's ancient body is constantly at loggerheads with her inner youthful heart. After walking through the magical fire, the youthful Tilo is transported to her spice store in San Francisco with an old body. She is "a bent woman with skin the colour of old sand" with "creases and gnarls" (4-5) on her body. Her conflict in the novel is not only cultural but also metaphysical. As Sonya Domergue aptly points out, hers is an internal conflict "between her real youthful, inner self, which reaches out to the world and life outside, and her outer, aged, powerful self, which keeps her within strictly imposed limits" (70). It is this dichotomy between Tilo's inner and outer selves that adds depth to her character. The movie, however, depicts Tilo as an attractive young woman, conveniently eliding the conflict which makes her, in a Forsterian sense, a rounded character. The film-makers' decision to cast the beautiful Aishwarya Rai is not just to maintain the glamour quotient of the film but it is also symptomatic of brandishing India, spiced and synthesised, bottled and labelled, for quick selling at the Euro-American market.

The first world prefers India's age-old wisdom to be aesthetically packed. Thus, it is possible to read this film as a metaphor of marketing India for the world in the postcolonial scenario. The sari-draped Aishwarya is the main "spice" of the movie; she is the object of desire just as the spices are. Quite commendably, the film has chosen an interesting spectrum of colours for Rai's sari—beginning from pastel sesame to blue, green, black and so forth. The deeper she gets into her relationship with Doug, the deeper the sari colour becomes. Finally, she wears a bright red sari with a halter neck blouse when she decides to consummate her passion; thus the sari, which earlier in the film symbolized tradition and sexual restraint, makes a bold erotic statement at the end. Hence, the film makers, Chadha and Berges, have made Rai the object of the audience's gaze.

The question as to who constitutes the audience is crucial. Needless to say, it is largely made up of first world viewers. Both the mistress and the spices are flaunted as "Indian." Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings are acutely sensitive to racial problems in America. Her novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, is no exception as it engages with them seriously whilst also probing for possible solutions. Several instances of racist attacks are enumerated as Tilo reads the forbidden newspaper. There is Mohan, a food vendor beaten and crippled for life, "broken in body broken in mind by America" (172). Tilo is against at the newspaper stories she reads and has several visions simultaneously:

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 duppata 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. I will split once again tonight kalo jire seeds for all who have suffered from America. (172-173)

But the movie prefers to remain silent on these issues. Barring the scene where a bunch of white children thrash Jagjit, a Sikh boy, there is no explicit instance when racist issues are addressed. Even the attack on Haroun is not portrayed as being racist in nature. The movie purposely chooses to be mute about racial discrimination in the U.S. It overlooks the novel's political angle, presenting a pleasant but myopic version of the United States as a multicultural society.

The same politics precludes the cinematic presence of Lalita in the movie. Lalita is one of the shop's first customers as the novel begins. She is a victim of marital violence and, to make matters worse, she has no support system in America. Forced to migrate to America after her fateful marriage with a much older man, Lalita represents countless Indian women "given away" in marriage for purely

economic reasons to Indian men settled in America. Tilo encourages Lalita to leave her husband and seek a new life of self empowerment by joining a battered women's house run by Indians. Needless to say, the spices constantly support her.

The film flinches from showcasing anything which disturbs the beautiful Tilo- Doug love idyll. The novel upholds and foregrounds Raven, a Native American man, as the spiritual counterpart of Tilo in America. But Raven in the movie becomes the culturally ambiguous Doug, with his spiritual side entirely removed. Raven is not a mainstream American, but belongs to one of the most marginalised groups in America. His history has been scarred by economic and political exploitation. Raven, like his people, had to face a difficult choice of either passing as a mainstream white American or adhering to his "different" culture. Raven's mother shuns her identity markers and masquerades as a white American; it is only after a disturbing encounter with his great grandfather that the truth about his mother's origins is revealed. He then realises that everything he appreciated about his mother, including her name, was fake; a conscious self-fashioning by her to pass as a white, American woman.

This revelation is a turning point in his life which makes him distance himself from his mother and the values she espouses. After undergoing a prolonged inner conflict and soul searching, he re-christens himself, thus openly embracing his Native American identity. He becomes spiritually inclined, so much so that he is the only one who perceives Tilo's true identity through his dreams. They relate to and bond with each other because they both face a similar kind of conflict. Both belong to different marginalized communities, both stand for a world view which differs from the 'rational' world view of the West. Tilo and Raven both prioritise the metaphysical rather than materialist aspects of life; hence they resist the hegemonic, homogenizing culture of America. As Tilo realises after Raven narrates the story of his encounter with his great grandfather, "Raven too holds alegacy of power" (203).

The novel clearly underpins this interracial consolidation as the strongest tool which can combat racism and further hints that subalterns who have a shared consciousness of subjugation can form an alliance. On the other hand, the film does not capture these nuances. Doug comes across as a "white" American with no indication whatsoever of any inner conflict or any dream vision which brings him instinctively into Tilo's shop. Perhaps Doug is attracted to Tilo, not because he gauges her powers, but because of her beauty and Indian-ness.

In addition, no reason is provided for Tilo's reciprocating Doug's feelings. This simplistic and reductive handling of the Tilo-Doug relationship in the film converts it into a mere love story. It is thus possible to argue that the film develops on a working principle of a hero representing America and a heroine representing India. They fall in love and, after resolving the East-West differences, live happily ever after. To re-invoke Wagner's statement on food metaphors, the position of spices as commodity is problematized in the movie. Spices, we may say, lured the West to the East. The entire project of colonialism started due to spices. It is one of the most studied subjects in the cultural materialist discourse. Spices, due to the colonial enterprise, stand for the East. The Orient was always "spicy" for the Occident. Here we would like to refer to Timothy Morton's path breaking work *The Poetics of Spices*. According to him, Spice participates in discourses of spectrality, sacred presence, liminality, wealth, exoticism, commerce and imperialism. It is caught up in, but not limited to, the forms of capitalist ideology... Spice is a complex and contradictory marker: of figure and ground, sign and referent, species and genus; of love and death, epithalamium and epitaph, sacred and profane, medicine and poison, Orient and Occident; and of the traffic between these terms. (9)

Spices thus stand for so many things simultaneously in the novel. They are an essential household

commodity for the Indian immigrant community, also catering to the nostalgia for the homeland left behind. Concurrently, for people not belonging to the Indian immigrant community, spices provide the “exotic” quotient in their multicultural palettes. Spices are shown to empower their mistress while at the same time they enslave her. Spices have strong colonial connotations, as well as the subversive power of the postcolonial era. The Americans who frequent the spice store are unwittingly incorporated into the worldview which spices stand for; be it Kwesi, Juan or Raven. Throughout the novel, spices are shown as having paradoxical qualities, such as healing and punishing, creating and destroying, beautifying and deforming, soothing and inflicting pain and so forth.

The spices exist in the interstitial space between the binaries; they take on different levels of meanings in different situations. We suggest that spices become a polyphonic signifier in both the fictional original and its cinematic adaptation. In the novel as well as the film, the discourse of spices is problematized. On the one hand, spices are “mastered” by a female incidentally called “Mistress,” rendering an unmistakably colonial “master-slave” flavour. Simultaneously, the “Mistress” is dictated by the whimsical spices, paradoxically implying that she is actually not the Mistress but a slave of the spices. The normative master-slave relationship is subverted by the spices and eventually the spices are empowered. Spices, as the First Mother says, symbolize tradition. Tradition is handed down from generation to generation, and with tradition comes knowledge. Spices and their magical/medicinal use is part of that knowledge. The pedagogy prevalent in the Spice Island is actually based on prototypical gurukul—the ancient Indian school. The knowledge is imparted systematically from the guru to students.

Although the sacred orality of the Indian tradition is upheld (as the knowledge of spices is imparted orally), the paradigm of the Indian gurukul is partially inverted, insofar as the knowledge providing guru and the students are all females. Spices are constantly in conversation with the Mistress, which the audience cannot hear. Tradition is resistant to change and spices, being a material manifestation of tradition, put up resistance too. Spices are as rigid as the monolithic traditions they belong to. But following the example of their Mistress the spices mellow a little in the novel. The film projects an allshining reconciliation of spices and the new world order, while the novel rejects such a frictionless fusion of East and West. We will later elaborate on the implications that the changed ending of the movie has, but we want to reiterate the fact that spices symbolized the Orient not only in the colonial discourse but continue to do so in the postcolonial, cosmopolitan world.

And it is here that the film and the novel seem to coalesce as both have empowered spices as a signifier of India and the Indian ethos. Spice, John Thieme and Ira Raja write, “was central to the economic commodification of South Asia as a part of the colonial project” (xxxix). Further, they rightly point out that one should not ignore the fact that spice and its symbolism has a much longer history. The First Mother and her knowledge, which she imparts to the novices, is one of the instances where the history of spices is situated in a timeless, unchronicled cultural past. This pre-colonial past of spices makes the West and its stereotypical colonial analyses of the East redundant. According to Thieme and Raja, the novel is no doubt a form of “post colonial cosmopolitanism” (xxxix) where, in spite of seeking a Westernized readership, the complexity of spice names and their significance is retained without annotations. This runs contrary to the alleged foot-note school of diasporic Indian writings. Divakaruni uses the tropology of spices for “strategic exoticism” (Thieme and Raja xxxix). However, we would like to contend that in the novel, exoticizing is not used for “self Orientalism” (to use Wagner’s term); it is used to become socially armed to survive on the cultural margins of an alien country. As Ketu H. Katrak asserts, “Marginal cultural productions are capitalized on in today’s marketplace” (197). As the capitalizing agencies are still situated in the West, the non-West has to retain its identity without being alienated. The Spice Bazaar in the film caters to the commodity fetishism associated with the capitalist, consumerist first world. The

multicultural market in the cosmopolitan scenario provides the opportunity to the culturally marginal population to propagate their culture. We think this is a two way process of how the first world fetish is willing to incorporate the global culture in its cosmopolitan cultural fold; and the non-West approves of it because of economic and social validation. But the novel and subsequently the film suggest that there is more to what the East gives to the West than just the consumable matter. The marginal culture does not merely provide the immediate cultural gratification for the mainstream, cosmopolitan culture; it also provides the spiritual capital which Divakaruni fictionalizes in her novel.

This spiritual capital heals the wounded, purges the guilt stricken, mitigates the pain of the scarred national consciousness and brings hope to the despairing community. Fortunately, spices don't just indulge in beatific activities because at times the wrath of spices can shake the foundation of the civilization. We can conclude that spices, which symbolise India, are an indispensable ingredient of any multiracial society. Tilo's spice shop dispenses aid to its customers. She, being the "architect of the American Dream" (28), eases her customers during their rites of passage. Customers come to the Spice Bazaar either to buy essentials or to gaze at the exotic commodities exhibited. Tilo is a familiarizing agent, who bridges the gap between the complex culinary science of India and the American fast food consumption culture. Spice Bazaar thrives and is frequented even by non-Indians due to this cultural propaganda. And Tilo, by the use of the spices, enables her customers to be happy. Her spice shop is thus metaphoric of the Indian presence in the world.

The shop is constructed as a microcosm of India and the spices in the shop function as spiritual ingredients, which initiate the healing process. Multiculturalism and the ensuing problems which cannot be solved by first world rationalism can be solved by spices. Spices thus become the Indian way of constructing the multicultural world in the postcolonial era by co-opting Western consumerism. Here, we have to highlight the fact that the intensity of magic and its scope is delimited in the film. Spices are mystic but not all powerful. In the novel the spices shake tectonic plates and cause an earthquake as a karmic punishment for racial hatred, while in the film the earthquake becomes merely a resolving device whereby the spices undergo a change of heart and accept the human side of their mistress. Tilo, in the novel, is bereft of spices, but in the film she continues to reign over her spice shop as glamorously as ever. The agenda of the film is the glossy endorsement of the Indian community in America. The ugliness of so called multicultural America is never addressed. The movie dilutes the political convictions of the novel, reducing it to a mere spectacle of spices. The film circulates a hollow, but hallowed idea of India. We would now like to highlight the difference between the ending of the film and the novel. The latter, as we remarked earlier, does not see the possibility of an easy commingling of cultures, while the former is far more optimistic that the ancient value-system can have a peaceful coexistence with the Western capitalist cult. In the novel, the earthquake is caused by the spices, destroying the material world that America prides itself on. It is at exactly this moment that the spices leave Tilo.

The earthquake is indicative of destruction of the established world order wherein the hegemony of the West prevails. The cultural differences or the polarity of world views which exist in the present world order cannot be done away with unless the entire societal structure is dismantled and thus this earthquake proves to be a great leveller. Before leaving Tilo, the spices facilitate the construction of a new cosmos by destroying the existing one, which is in accordance with the Indian life cycle—creation, preservation and destruction. Consequently, both Tilo and Raven decide to create a "dream land" within the ruins of the devastated city. Naturally, creation ensues after the inevitable destruction.

Thus, it is implied that when America is divested of its material glamour and India is shorn of its spiritual powers, it is only individual integrity that will restore order in the chaotic world. In this

utopia, there would be no racial or ethnic discrimination, resulting in an egalitarian society. Only in the reconstructed world can the Tilos and the Ravens of the world unite without any hurdles. The novel does not advocate abandoning traditions but it underpins a progressive ideology of accommodating the old with the new, the East with the West, nevertheless privileging the Eastern worldview over the established norms of the rationalistic Western worldview. It upholds deep-rooted multiculturalism and also envisions a probable alternative power structure wherein the members of the marginalized community in America come together with their shared knowledge of ancient wisdom.

It certainly seems sceptical about an effortless interracial union in the existing state of affairs. In the film, the Indian ethos seems to extend its limits and incorporate the world view of the West in its heterogeneous, pluralistic fold, which can be perceived as Chadha's hopeful intervention. The film promotes a healthy mixture of cultures in the idyllic multiracial world, while the novel poses serious questions to this idyll. Further, the film refuses to engage with larger societal problems, and posits the uncomplicated treatment of a cross-cultural love story as a political device to undermine the racial issue, with Tilo and Doug uniting without any galactic conflicts. Tilo continues being the mistress of spices, in spite of her relationship with Doug. The spices become much more accommodating and the Mistress is allowed to pursue her personal life. Tilo hears First Mother saying that spices won't leave her as she has proved her devotion to them. The last scene is a series of shots—Tilo re-opening the door of the shop, a river-side clichéd romantic walk of Tilo and Doug, and the most blatant of all, Tilo and Doug making love on the red-chilli couch. The most dreaded of the spices, the red-chilli, facilitates their union. The background track has a ring of familiarity for the viewers, as it is taken from a mainstream Bollywood film of yesteryear. Thus, as we pointed out earlier, the film is a simple and beautiful love story. But, nevertheless, it endorses the "brand India" in Hollywood, Aishwarya in her saris being one of the spicy ingredients. India is served on a platter for American and British viewers. After watching the film they are likely to identify such Spice Bazaars in their locality and accept their presence as part of their own broader cosmopolitan culture. Hence, though it is a one-dimensional version of the novel, the film privileges spices, a symbol which empowers the Indian diasporic community.

Chadha and Berges capitalize on the dense metaphor of spices in order to display a new culture as intersected by their ethnic culture and the mainstream culture. The diasporic communities seek such empowering symbols from their native land, and Chadha's festooning Indian culture and spices is a genuine attempt to reaffirm her identity as a diasporic Indian. At the end of the novel, Tilo is no longer a Mistress, while in the film she continues as such. Her union with Doug does not divest her of the power of spices as it does in the novel. Spices thus continue to give power to Tilo to heal the immigrant community in the United States; the Mistress herself from being a migrant becomes an immigrant. America becomes her home and spices are her sole weapon to make her and her people's lives better. Although Chadha and Berges' film dilutes the cultural conflict raging in Divakaruni's novel and also indulges in shallow exoticism, it upholds its own ideology, viz., that of the effortless amalgamation of the East and the West.

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