



## Cultural Appropriation and Diasporic Negotiations in *The Mistress of Spices and Brick Lane*

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### Abstract

Human beings have been migrating to other countries since time immemorial. When they leave their homeland, preferring the host land, their belief systems, ideologies, and food systems are also carried along with them to the host land. Immigrants influence the natives of the host land to copy their practices, leading to cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation, assimilation, acculturation, and integration are the result of migration. Contrary to assimilation, acculturation, and integration, cultural appropriation is the adoption of the characteristics of immigrants' culture by the natives of the host land. People of the West are also getting attracted to the different cultures and traditions of the immigrants. Cultural assimilation, acculturation, and integration are the processes of partially or entirely adopting elements of the host land culture by the immigrants. Cultural appropriation is a newly recognised trait of colonialism. The dominant culture copies the minority culture by adopting the cultural elements practised by the minority culture, which is regarded as exotic. Cultural aspects involve religious tradition, fashion symbols, language, and music. This paper mainly focuses on cultural appropriation depicted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* and Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*. These writers describe Westerners as having a keen interest in the dressing style, rituals, culinary practices, and religion of the immigrants settled in the First World countries. Immigrants are projected as instrumental in influencing the people of the host land directly or indirectly. Cultural appropriation will be studied in the light of postcolonial theorist Homi K Bhabha's concept of hybridity and third space.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Cultural Appropriation, Homeland, Hostland, Third Space, Hybridity.

Women Writers of the South Asian Diaspora, like Chitra Banerjee, Divakaruni, and Monica Ali, hailing from South Asia and living in First World countries, have given space to cultural appropriation in their writings. Diaspora literature produced by women is fascinating as these women writers express the diverse pictures related to experiencing cultural differences, adapting to a new community, acculturation, and hybridisation processes. They share their knowledge, experience, their migration in their home and host land. In *The Mistress of Spices* and *Brick Lane*, these writers are keenly interested in debating the issues of cultural conflicts, differences, identity formation, assimilation, integration, negation, oppression, sex discrimination, gender inequality, and cultural appropriation. This paper, with a focus on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, brings out the features of cultural appropriation that affect the lives of both natives of the host land and immigrants on emotional, social, cultural, and physical levels. Culture is associated with a group of people based on their ethnicity, religion, geography, or social environment. Cultural appropriation is also termed cultural misappropriation. It refers to taking something that doesn't belong to you or your culture. Cultural Appropriation is different from acculturation or assimilation. It is an exchange that happens when a dominant group takes or borrows something from a minority group that has historically been exploited or oppressed. Cultural elements involve religion, tradition, fashion, symbols, language, and music. These elements are deeply rooted in the authentic culture and treated as "exotic" by the dominant culture.

Tilo, the mistress of spices, runs a spice shop in Oakland, California. All kinds of people from different races and religions visit her spice store. Different characters of different nationalities come to her spice store, like Kwesi, African-American, Raven, Native-American, Haroun, Kashmiri-Muslim, Jagjit, Sikh boy,

Geeta's Grandfather, Mrs Ahuja, Daksha, Manu, and so on. The people in a multicultural society undergo more inter-racial and inter-ethnic experiences, thus they are less likely to make generalisations about other racial and ethnic groups. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) combined results from across 515 different studies and found that the more contact people have with others outside their racial group, the less prejudiced they are.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has given many references to cultural appropriation in *The Mistress of Spices*. One of Tilo's clients, Kwesi African-American, asks Tilo about the recipe for Pakora. "Very nice, I say when he tells me he's going to make pakoras for a special friend" (MOS, 68). Raven, the Native-American, chooses spicy snacks instead of a milder brand in one instance. He regards the mixture snack as an 'exotic' other and wants to experiment with it on himself. The host land society is segregated along racial and ethnic lines. There is a greater probability of interaction among people belonging to different races and ethnic cultures.

Divakaruni has given many references to ethnic food: "They are serving their men biriyani fragrant with ghee, cool bowls of raita, patra seasoned with fenugreek. And for dessert, dripping with gold honey, gulab-jamuns the colour of dark roses" (MOS, 50). Appropriation by the white [dominant culture] of the culinary practices of non-white (Other) to suit the white palate has been presented by the writer. "A woman in a kitchen, cooking my rice. She is fragrant as the grains she rolls between her fingers to see if they are done... begin the frying, mustard seeds sputtering in the pan, brinjal and bitter gourd turning yellow-red. Into a curry of cauliflowers like white fists, she mixes garam masala... sprinkling over sweet kheer that has simmered all afternoon, cardamom seeds from my shop" (MOS, 61). There is an amalgamation of culinary practices of minorities (racially oppressed or colonised) with other ethnic communities. The element of food is used by the

writer as a reference on different occasions to break the cultural barrier.

In *Brick Lane*, the life and culture of the Bangladeshi community in the block of flats in London's East End are depicted. Society is pluralistic, comprising people from different races and religions inhabiting Tower Hamlets. Nazneen, in a letter, tells her sister Hasina, "In London the people have no God" (BL, 154). There is a reference to Hindu Gods used for marketing by the Raj restaurant. "Days of the Raj restaurant had a new statue in the window: Ganesh seated against a rising sun, his trunk curling playfully on his breast. The Lancer already displayed Radha- Krishna; Popadum went with Saraswati; Sweet Lassi covered all the options with a black-tongued, evil-eyed Kali and a torpid soapstone Buddha. 'Hindus?' said Nazneen when the trend first started. 'Here?' Chanu patted his stomach. 'Not Hindus. Marketing. Biggest god of all.' The white people liked to see the gods. 'For authenticity,' said Chanu" (BL, 446). This reference depicts that the culture of South East Asia has an immense influence on the whites and people of other nationalities. The people of the West are attracted to the different cultures and traditions of the immigrants. They are fascinated by the mythological gods of the Hindu religion. Different customs and festivals celebrated by South Asians influence the mindset of natives of First World countries. They take a keen interest in their dressing style, rituals, culinary practices, and religious teachings, and try to imbibe them in their life also. Immigrants are instrumental in influencing the people of the host land directly or indirectly.

In the novel *Brick Lane*, after the Twin Towers attack in America, there was unrest among people in America and Europe. The new radical group 'Lion Hearts' came into existence and tried to disseminate hatred and racism against the Muslims and Hindus in the area. Chanu asks his daughter to read aloud a leaflet dropped by members of the 'Lion Heart': "In our schools, ' continued Shahana, it's

multicultural murder. Do you know what they are teaching your children today? In domestic science, your daughter will learn how to make a Kebab or fry a bhaji. For his history lesson, your son will be studying Africa, India, or some other dark and distant land. English people, he will learn, are Wicked Colonialists" (BL, 251).

These lines suggest that the multi-ethnic society of London is assimilating the culture and traditions of the Indian Subcontinent. It is evident that members of a dominant culture (white) take elements from a culture of 'other' (African-Asian)) whom they have oppressed. It upsets white people and may take the form of violence targeting minorities. They try to take control of the power imbalance to make the position of white people at a superior level and less for marginalised minority, poor people of color. "And in Religious Instruction, what will your child be taught? Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? No. Krishna, Abraham, and Muhammad" (BL, 251). When you are interacting with people similar to you, it causes you to form inaccurate beliefs about other people. As a result, you will likely develop surface-level stereotypes about certain groups instead of viewing people as complex, multifaceted individuals with varying beliefs, values, and goals. If you show love and appreciation for parts of a culture, such as clothing, food, etc., but remain prejudiced against its people, that's appropriation.

Bhabha (1994), in *The Location of Culture*, believes that hybridisation is inherent to all types of racial transformations and traditional revival. He posits that in Third Space, the elements of distinct origins confront one another, and a collective change follows. Third Space is an open, comprehensive space supporting the absorption of opposed signs and metanarratives, which continue as an essential prerequisite for expressing cultural differences. Selfhood is based on the location between 'them' and 'us'.

Cultural appropriation is a result of the interaction of different races and ethnic

communities in this modern, globalised world. The immigrants carry something to a new place that influences the settlers, and sometimes the host also starts practising the same. It may be a desire among the natives to learn, adopt, and admire the different cultures, belief systems, ideologies, and food habits of the immigrants. People in First World countries are living within a fantastically diverse multicultural world. Sharing in each other's cultures is not only good; when done right, it is important and helps build community.

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