

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE VARIOUS DIMENSIONS OF CONFLICT IN THE NOVEL "THE MISTRESS OF SPICES" FOCUSING ON THE CONFLICTING CHARACTERS

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## **Abstract:**

"Conflict serves as the inception of consciousness," said the renowned psychotherapist M. Esther Harding, who authored the book "Women's Mysteries." Conflict is an unavoidable aspect of life, but it may also serve as a valuable chance for acquiring knowledge, gaining expertise, and gaining a deeper understanding. Conflict shapes and delineates individuals' lives, personalities, self-perceptions, and restless state of mind. This study examines the sense of struggle, a prominent thematic strategy in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel The Mistress of Spices (1997). Divakaruni skillfully combines the enchantment of spices with the many elements of struggle in her first novel. The bulk of characters in the story, including the protagonist Tilottama, commonly referred to as Tilo, experience various forms of conflict and hardship in their lives. Divakaruni delves into the intricate and complex experiences of Indian immigrants, examining their struggles, dilemmas, conflicts, crises, antagonisms, and frustrations. Conflict is an essential element of the narrative structure since the protagonist must face and overcome it to develop their awareness. The characters, therefore, encounter conflict either overtly or covertly.

Keywords: Conflict, The Mistress of Spices, Overtly, Covertly and Mysteries

The characters in The Mistress of Spices face ongoing external and internal challenges. The story centres around Tilo, who serves as the priestess of the clandestine mystical abilities possessed by spices. She operates a spice store and employs mystical spices to restore, treat, and invigorate the troubled lives of the Indian immigrants in the unfamiliar territory of California. Tilo assumes the role of an observer of the hardships endured by the other characters and endeavours to alleviate their anguish. The author constructs an imaginary setting with dreams, fantasies, daydreams, and sensuality. Divakaruni skilfully combines the enchanting backdrop of magic with the palpable

world of postcolonial marginalisation, encompassing various conflicts, including gender, social, racial, generational, cultural, psychological, metaphysical, assimilation, and multi-ethnic identity.

Tilo observes these postcolonial scenarios and eventually gets embroiled in her internal strife. Tilo is bound by specific regulations in her role as a Mistress of Spices (emphasis added). She adopts the guise of an older woman and refrains from gazing at her reflection. She refrains from leaving her business or the spices to explore the nearby metropolis. She is prohibited from assisting anybody other than her people and physically contacting anyone. Tilo's enigmatic realm is wholly disrupted when an 'isolated American' visits her establishment for the first time. Tilo has an intense and irresistible desire towards him, leading her to give up her magical abilities completely. The narrative emphasises Tilo and Raven's inner psychological aspects, resulting in a significant clash between their identities. Tilo experiences marginalisation as an immigrant, and her identity as the Mistress of Spice disintegrates. Tilo consistently feels a sensation of exile in the foreign nation of America. She has increased isolation from the physical realm due to her inability to leave her business or observe the outside world via her window. The protagonist expresses her frustration, stating that she is entirely unknown to everyone over the entire expanse of this country. She experiences a dual identity crisis when she realises that she is genuinely enslaved by spices rather than being in control of them. Upon developing feelings for Raven, she faces embracing a magical existence or continuing a conventional life as a woman. She, like other immigrant children, is cautioned against allowing America to entice her into unforeseen disasters. " Don't let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don't rouse the spices' hate " (TMOS 140). She wants to experience the enchantment of everyday existence. However, she cannot employ mystical seasonings for her joy, "to all whom she has loved as she should not, chaos comes" (TMOS 94, emphasis original).

Tilo assumes culpability for the sufferings endured by her clients, including Jagjit, Lalita, and Haroun. She rebels against the long-standing rules. Overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness, Tilo yearns for her individuality, purposefully defies the rules, and embarks on a journey into the city to directly aid people rather than relying on the assistance of the enchanted spices.

While a young lady, Tilo is burdened with an aged body due to the customs of the mystical island from where she has acquired her current form, the story highlights the tension between Tilo's ageing physical body and her vibrant inner spirit. Therefore, Tilo has several instances of identity crises and a feeling of uncertainty that contradicts her true personality. Despite inhabiting an aged physique, she yearns for the affection, passion, and sensuality her spirit longs for. Tilo experiences the conflict of her dual life as she grows up in two worlds simultaneously. One realm is tangible, while the other is a fantastical island where she transcends her physical form and sense of self. Tilo grapples with establishing a cohesive sense of self, compels her to defy long-standing societal norms. As she observes the suffering of her clients, Tilo becomes ensnared in her predicament and internal fight. She is torn between her responsibilities and obligations and her emotions and desires. Due to her inability to select both options, she encounters ethical, intellectual, and emotional obstacles.

Furthermore, her feeling disconnected from others and her struggle to define herself intensify her restlessness and inability to make decisions. Ultimately, she disregards regulations, becomes defiant, trusts her intuition, and prioritises her love over the spices. Consistently serving as an assistant, Tilo ultimately finds a solution to her dilemma and the dilemmas of others.

Except for 'the Old One,' only Raven acknowledges Tilo's identity. Raven serves as the trigger for Tilo's transformation, leading her to discover her own identity. Tilo consistently addresses Raven as 'My lonely American' or 'My American' rather than using his given name. The shared experience of loneliness serves as a bond between Tilo and Raven, drawing them closer together. Tilo ponders, "It is unexpected." "[I]t is a surprise. I did not know that Mistress could feel so lonely" (TMOS 69). Raven is Tilo's soul partner, a character experiencing a state of restlessness and navigating through a complex struggle involving several ethnic and cultural groups. Raven has discomfort when Tilo refers to him as 'white.' This is because Raven is a member of a marginalised community in America, specifically the Native Americans. Raven acquires the knowledge belatedly due to his mother severing all ties with the previous tribe and assimilating into the dominant culture. Raven's mother rejects tribal pride and prevents her son from engaging with the mystical realm of Native Americans. Profoundly unsettled by his newfound identity and the detachment of power, Raven removes himself from his mother. During his dream, he perceives Tilo's real nature and comprehends his deep connection with her. Both individuals possess the confidential knowledge and historical significance of the magical practices associated with their respective groups.

Tilo informs Raven that she is aware of Raven's undisclosed information. She asserts: "I know you do ... Because I have them too. Every one of us"." Every one of us" (TMOS 150). Tilo and Raven's worlds are intricately intertwined in a realm of enchantment. Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri and Shweta Rao, in their essay titled "India on a Platter: A Study of Gurinder Chadha and Paul Mayeda Berges' Cinematic Adaptation of The Mistress of Spices," note that the characters in the film connect and form a strong relationship due to their shared experience of a common type of struggle. Both individuals belong to distinct marginalised populations, and both advocate for a worldview that diverges from the "rational" perspective of the Western world (Lahiri & Rao 5). As individuals living in a postcolonial era within a globalised society, both parties acknowledge that it is impossible to completely embrace or reject any aspect of their different cultural heritage. It is necessary to acknowledge and enhance the variety of cultural traditions.

In addition to Tilo, Divakaruni portrays Lalita, another marginalised woman who embodies the characteristics of a postcolonial subaltern figure. Lalita is frequently identified as 'Ahuja's wife' in the text. She is shown as a subaltern, lacking a personal past and the ability to express herself (Spivak 28). Lalita is a member of a marginalised minority that has experienced colonisation twice, resulting in her identity being ambiguous within both her community and her gender. Lalita finds herself in a loveless marriage, where her parents are more interested in a boy living abroad and earning American dollars. This situation leaves Lalita feeling trapped and doubly isolated. Lalita represents the many Indian wives marginalised within their own families in the unfamiliar territory of America.

Moreover, Ahuja's endeavour to commit sexual assault on his wife eliminates any possibility for Lalita to acknowledge him as her spouse. Lalita's resistance is futile. The speaker sighs and states, "I can still hear the ripping sound, li ke it was my life" (TMOS 270, emphasis in the original). Deprived of the opportunity to become a wife, Lalita yearns to experience her femininity by becoming a mother. Lalita's aspiration of becoming a mother is crushed as a result of her husband's impotence, thereby shattering her ultimate goal of motherhood. In her role as the Mistress of Spices, Tilo believes that Lalita will not benefit from the spices until she prepares herself for transformation. Lalita's quest for self-identity culminates in the Recognition of her femininity occurs when she asserts her dignity and self-respect. Lalita confronts her internal struggle with boldness when she proclaims, "I deserve dignity, I deserve Happiness" (TMOS 272).

Divakaruni explores the racial tension in modern urban American society by portraying Jagjit, a reserved and isolated Punjabi youngster. Jagjit experiences racial discrimination at school. The inner tension experienced by Jagjit is a nuanced reflection of the author's autobiographical recollection of her early days in America as an immigrant. According to Uma Girish:

It happened in 1976 when Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni was all of 19. Walking down a Chicago street with some relatives she was appalled when a few white teenagers yelled "nigger" and hurled slush at her. The incident, deeply shaming, was never discussed, but it stayed and played in her mind and acted as the spur to kick start her writing. And then one evening, her five-year-old son Abhay returned from school and tried hard to wash off the 'dirt' color of his skin. It's little wonder that much of Divakaruni's writing resonates with the Indi an-American immigrant experience. 'Writing was a way to go beyond the silence,' she offers. And even as she tried to adjust to the reality of life in an alien culture, her other life, the real one, was dimming inside her head (Girish np).

Divakaruni demonstrates her understanding and emotional connection with the deep sadness and suffering experienced by an Indian immigrant in her portrayal of Jagjit, a Punjabi youngster. Jagjit, unable to express his emotions to his parents, silently endures and manages his internal struggle. The word 'idiot' is the initial English term he acquires, followed by 'asshole' as the second. Ashutosh Dubey states that the immigrant experience is intricate, as a perceptive immigrant constantly finds themselves in a state of transition, filled with recollections of their original country that clash with the challenges of the new environment (Dubey 22). This conflict is effectively depicted in the book when Jagjit envisions himself shimmering on his grandmother's agricultural field in Jullunder. However, regrettably, he is confronted with the harsh reality of the mocking sound of "Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole" (TMOS 39). The students in school spit on him and pull his pants down in the playground while the girls are looking (TMOS 39). Jagjit is struggling to adapt to the new culture. In her role as the Mistress of Spices, Tilo can perceive the feeling of being excluded and alienated, which is evident in him. Jagjit encounters the difficulties of exile and experiencing feelings of isolation in the contemporary cultural landscape. His ethnic and cultural identity faces persistent threats as he endures recurrent humiliation due to his accent and turban. Due to the constant animosity, Jagjit is finally irritated

by his uniqueness and desires to assimilate into the mainstream. Seeking a "passport into the real America" (TMOS 121, emphasis original), he abandons Jagjit and embraces the more Americanized name 'Jag.' Tilo is taken aback to find him dressed in a T-shirt, baggy Girbaud jeans, and untied laces, the attire commonly worn by young Americans, instead of his usual parrot green turban. Currently, Jagjit has undergone a significant physical transformation. However, he quickly becomes ensnared in a dangerous situation involving illicit narcotics, firearms, and switchblades. Jagjit's decision to replace the Punjabi turban with Western clothes might be seen as altogether rejecting his culture.

Like Jagjit, Haroun is also an Indian from a marginalised community and frequently visits Tilo's business. Haroun experiences perpetual tension between his predetermined fate and his ultimate destiny. The lingering effects of his traumatic background continue to haunt him. His recollection extends to India, where many generations of his family operate shikaras for visitors at Dal Lake. Nevertheless, he tragically loses his family to acts of terrorism and, after that, seeks refuge in the United States. In the United States, he aspires to acquire wealth, happiness, and maybe even love, envisioning a captivating woman with alluring eyes resembling the petals of a dark lotus flower (TMOS 27-28). Despite his awareness of his marginalised position as a Muslim Indian in America, Haroun attempts to establish his sense of identity in a place characterised by estrangement. Haroun is fighting with his inexorable fate, which persistently pursues him with peril. Haroun encounters significant challenges in maintaining a conventional lifestyle in America while working as a taxi driver. He is also a target of a racially motivated assault, but he retaliates with the assistance of Tilo. Haroun exemplifies unwavering resolve as he triumphs over the adversities imposed by destiny. Despite his physical setback, his spirit stays resilient. As a postcolonial individual, Haroun is resolute in his quest to discover his identity and achieve his 'Great American Dream.' He is driven to overcome his marginalised position by actively fighting against the circumstances of his life, his fortune, and his predetermined future. He emerges victorious in his struggle by discovering his soulmate, Hameeda. His life is challenging and arduous, replete with hurdles and hindrances. Nevertheless, Haroun is shown as a postcolonial protagonist who persists in his opposition till the final moments.

Divakaruni portrays not just the clash of immigration but also the clash of integration. Geeta embodies the archetype of a third-generation immigrant, serving as a vehicle for the author to depict the clash of cultures.

Conflict arises between first-generation immigrant Indian parents and their children. The connection between Geeta and her grandpa, a devoted patron of Tilo's spices, highlights their values, culture, and philosophy divergence. Within this state of liminality, first-generation immigrants deeply long for their country of origin. They strongly adhere to their customs, faiths, and languages. Geeta's parents strongly desire to return to their place of origin, which they consider their "home." Their longing for their homeland is based on fragmented and incomplete recollections, which they use to construct their imagined homelands.

In contrast to her previous generation's profound feeling of being displaced and foreign, Geeta feels a strong sense of belonging in America. Geeta has friction both inside her family and with societal conventions. Geeta's identity and connection are further strained by her decision to choose Juan Cordero, a Chicano, as her life partner. Curiously, her family, who were initially opposed to adopting a white guy as her companion, become much more antagonistic upon discovering that Juan is African-American. The family's colonial mindset is evident when the grandpa expresses disapproval of the marriage, stating, "You are losing your caste and putting blackest *kali* on our ancestor's faces to marry a man who is *not even a sahib*, whose people are slum criminals and illegals" (TMOS 89, emphasis added). Paradoxically and amusingly for her parents, a white man is suddenly considered more socially acceptable than a Chicano.

The issue of assimilation is also depicted through the affluent Indian individuals residing in the United States. "The rich Indians rarely speak, as if too much money has clogged their throats" (TMOS 75). These individuals from the Indian community abandon their cultural identity and attempt to integrate into the dominant culture. Divakaruni provides the following commentary: The rich Indians crane their necks and lift their chins high because they have to be more always than other people, taller, handsomer, better dressed. Or at least richer (TMOS 76). Despite their wealth, Indians are conscious of their marginalisation and thus want to conceal it by assimilating into the dominant culture rather than remaining in a subordinate position. Even the youth can perceive the social disadvantage that their group experiences due to factors such as skin colour, ethnicity, and nationality. Tilo can perceive the soliloquy of an infant girl, which consists of spoken words or thoughts spoken by a single individual.

Through the use of mystical spices and her authentic determination, Tilo can discover a solution to all individuals' disputes. As foreigners in America, each character has positive and negative events and struggles to attain happiness, identity, dignity, and self-esteem. Divakaruni's examination of internal and exterior conflict becomes the necessary narrative style in the work. Amidst the many conflicts, the diverse characters undergo personal growth in order to expand their awareness, realise their inherent capabilities, identify their true priorities, and actively seek fulfilment and joy via this heightened state of consciousness.

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