CHAPTER IV

CULTURAL AMBIVALENCE IN CHITRA BANERJEE’S NOVELS

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought. Culture is part of the *external* influences that impact the consumer. That is, culture represents influences that are imposed on the consumer by other individuals. The definition of culture offered in Williams, is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man person as a member of society.” From this definition, we make the following observations:

- Culture, as a “complex whole,” is a system of interdependent components.
- Knowledge and beliefs are important parts. In the U.S., we know and believe that a person who is skilled and works hard will get ahead. In other countries, it may be believed that differences in outcome result more from luck. “Chunking,” the name for China in Chinese, literally means “The Middle Kingdom.” The belief among ancient Chinese that they were in the center of the universe greatly influenced their thinking.
- Other issues are relevant. Art, for example, may be reflected in the rather arbitrary practice of wearing ties in some countries and wearing turbans in others. Morality may be exhibited in the view in the United States that one should not be naked in public. In Japan, on the other hand, groups of men and women may take steam baths together without perceived as improper. On the other extreme, women in some Arab countries are not even allowed to reveal their faces. Notice, by the way, that what at least some countries view as moral may in fact be highly immoral by the standards of another country. For example, the law that once banned interracial marriages in South Africa was named the
“Immorality Act,” even though in most civilized countries this law, and any degree of explicit racial prejudice, would itself be considered highly immoral.

According to the definition given in the Concise Encyclopedia Britannica, culture is an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour, culture is both a result of and integral to the human capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations. Culture thus consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, and works of art, rituals, ceremonies, and symbols. It has played a crucial role in human evolution, allowing human beings to adapt the environment to their own purposes rather than depend solely on natural selection to achieve adaptive success. Every human society has its own particular culture, or socio cultural system. Variation among cultures is attributable to such factors as differing physical habitats and resources; the range of possibilities inherent in areas such as language, ritual, and social organization; and historical phenomena such as the development of links with other cultures.(54) An individual's attitudes, values, ideals, and beliefs are greatly influenced by the culture (or cultures) in which he or she lives. Culture change takes place as a result of ecological, socioeconomic, political, religious, or other fundamental factors affecting a society.

Superstitions are only a small part of culture but certainly an interesting part. Culture, then, refers to the totality of a people’s socially transmitted products of work and thought. The Indian American novelists express this inner turmoil caused to the immigrants as they try to settle down in the alien land – from de rooting to their assimilating in the foreign land. Debjani Banerjee remarks that: “Contemporary writing from South Asian Diaspora bears the marks of a cultural encounter that combines the rewriting of history with nuanced responses to dislocation and marginalization by hegemonic structures. The raw energy of first generation politics is substituted by a more complex response to issues of race and unbelonging. The new writers retort to their attempted marginalization, not by dissolving into mainstream but by rendering their distinctive voices” (2). Thus, there is a marked difference between the themes of earlier writers like Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand and Indian American novelists who write about their first hand experience in foreign land.
James Clifford claims that the modernist age is marked by a sense that "all the beautiful, primitive places are ruined," that there is a kind of "cultural incest, a sense of runaway history" haunting us, and giving us the feeling that cultural authenticity has been lost (4). Traditionally, change has been interpreted as disorder, as chaos, as loss of authenticity. But in the global intermixture of cultures that we have witnessed in this century, the authenticity of former cultures may not be lost in quite the ways we imagine them to be: "local authenticites meet and merge in transient urban and suburban settings," according to Clifford. This complex process of acculturation, of meeting and merging, poses a predicament for the contemporary student of culture: the student of culture must consider both "local attachments"--regional dialects and traditions, for example--and "general possibilities." In *The Predicament of Culture*, Clifford approaches ethnographic texts as "orchestrations...constructed domains of truth, serious fictions" (10). As such, in many ways they resemble those art forms which make use of collage, juxtaposition, and other forms of extended comparison.

In defining culture, then, it is important that we locate ourselves (and our beliefs, ethics, and assumptions) in relation to the culture we are studying, since culture is context-specific. It is also important to keep in mind, according to Clifford, that local cultures (sub-cultures) are often established in opposition to what might be termed the official culture--the status quo--defined by those with significant access to the media. In many cases, this opposition is between the individual, or small group, and the larger cultural body used as a sign of social cohesion and control. While popular culture is often defined as mass culture--the culture of the majority--it can also be seen as a site of continual change, adaptation, and subversion.

In the text, culture refers to the following: A community or population sufficiently large enough to be self-sustaining; that is, large enough to produce new generations of members without relying on outside people. It is the the totality of that group’s thought, experiences, and patterns of behaviour and its concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behaviour and how those evolve with contact with other cultures. Hofstede classified these elements of culture into four categories: symbols, rituals, values, and heroes. Symbols refer to verbal and nonverbal language. Rituals are
the socially essential collective activities within a culture. Values are the feelings not open for discussion within a culture about what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, normal or abnormal, which are present in a majority of the members of a culture, or at least in those who occupy pivotal positions. (98)

Geert Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another.” (21) Campbell on his part defines culture as “a complex web of information that a person learns and which guides each person’s actions, experiences, and perceptions”. (38) By its nature a “definition” ought to delimit a concept to such an extent that the hearer understands the truth of the reality completely. At first glance, none of the above two definitions does this for “culture”. While the first one seems even more abstract and ambiguous than the term being defined, describing it as “collective programming”, the second defines it a web of “information”, not specific enough to embrace the meaning of the concept. Banks defines culture as “the behavior, patterns, symbols, institutions, values, and other human made components of the society”. (52) And finally, Patricia Marshall defines it as “consistent ways in which people experience, interpret, and respond to the world around” (43).

As none of these definitions seem to convey the meaning of culture completely, there are common elements to be found among them. Consider Banks’ “patterns”, and Marshall’s “consistent ways”. Some of these elements include norms, values, behaviour patterns, rituals and traditions. These terms are not synonymous and are to be found in one form or another in various definitions of culture. They are manifestations of culture and express some aspects of it, but culture itself (the essence) is much deeper. Furthermore all of these have in common the concept of “sharing” in that to be considered culture, they have be found in many members of a group in the same way, over a period of time.

Culture is a slippery and ubiquitous concept. Initially, culture was associated with the notion of civilization tout-court. At the end of the 30s Margaret Mead puts in contrast “culture” with “a culture”. “Culture means the whole complex of traditional behaviour which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each
generation” (56-58). However, specificity of the notion of culture with respect to a given human society was needed in order to study other societies. So the same citation goes on as: “A culture is less precise. It means that the forms of traditional behaviour which have characteristics of a given society or of a group of societies, or of a certain race, or of certain area, or of a certain period of time” (58). As a consequence, in the anthropological literature, culture has been introduced as the concept denoting the object of study of cultural anthropology. Other definitions were proposed and they largely vary. However, they seem to converge to the notion that culture is learned (56), it is associated with groups of people and its content includes a wide range of phenomena including norms, values, shared meanings, and patterned ways of behaving. Brumann says in *Current Anthropology* that anthropological literature the usefulness of the notion of culture as a scientific tool has been attacked giving rise to the so-called “writing against culture movement” (40).

The culture as defined in anthropology usually refers to societies defined in national or ethnic terms, however, the concept of culture has been recently used for describing knowledge and behavior of other groups like in the concepts of corporate culture or organizational culture (13-20). Moreover, globalization has brought about the problem of interaction of cultures. On the one hand, such interaction leads to blurring boundaries between cultures, while on the other hand it leads to the increasing need of cultural-aware managers and professionals. Recent anthropology textbook definitions take into account the shift in meaning as, for example, in the definition by Peoples and Bailey: Culture is the socially transmitted knowledge and behaviour shared by some group of people (Peoples and Bailey (23).

Earlier authors define culture in the following ways: Culture refers to learned, accumulated experience. According to Hofstede, culture refers to those socially transmitted patterns for behaviour characteristic of a particular social group (21). Boyd, R& Richerson opines that Culture, or civilization is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (56-61). The culture of any society consists of the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual
behaviour which the members of that society have acquired through instruction or imitation and which they share to a greater or less degree (60). Harrison and Carroll in *Culture and Demography in Organizations* view that culture is the total socially acquired life-way or life-style of a group of people. It consists of the patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are characteristic of the members of a particular society or segment of a society (25). As we can see, definitions agree on the fact that culture consists of something that is shared and/or learned by a group of people, but the content of the culture varies in different definitions. Similarly to Axelrod, the content of the culture is as a set of traits, which can refer to behaviour, knowledge facts, ideas, beliefs, norms, etc:

Traits are further grouped in features in Axelrod’s formulation, i.e. each feature can take value from a set of specific traits. A formal definition of culture consistently with literature, we define an agent as a “[…] physical or virtual entity that can act, perceive its environment (in a partial way) and communicate with others, is autonomous and has skills to achieve its goals and tendencies […]” (203-206).

An agent can represent an individual or a collective entity such as an organization, and can have different cultural traits, which are characteristics of human societies that are potentially transmitted by non-genetic means and can be owned by an agent. The requirement “can be owned by”, which we add to the definition by Mulder (54-62), means that it is possible for an agent to have a cultural trait. Different kinds of behavior, beliefs, knowledge, mentioned as elements of culture previously, are just particular kinds cultural traits in terms of our formalism.

A first challenge in conducting research involving culture is arriving at an understanding of what culture is, given the myriad of definitions, conceptualizations, and dimensions used to describe this concept (Straub et al. 2002). Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), for example, identified definitions of culture, and Sackmann (1992) discusses how culture has been framed in various studies as ideologies, coherent sets of beliefs,
basic assumptions, shared sets of core values, important understandings, and the collective will. Others suggest that culture includes more explicit, observable cultural artifacts such as norms and practices (Delong and Fahey 2000; Hofstede 1998), symbols (Burchell et al. 1980), as well as language, ideology, rituals, myths, and ceremony (Pettigrew 1979). Jermier et al. (1991) make this distinction between tacit and explicit components of culture, describing the tacit aspect (e.g., assumptions) as *ideational* while the more explicit artifacts of culture (e.g., norms and practices) are referred to as *material*. Schein’s (1985a, 1985b) three-level model of culture describes both the more observable aspects of culture, such as artifacts, and the less observable aspects. According to Schein, basic assumptions are at the core of culture and represent the belief systems that individuals have toward human behavior, relationships, reality, and truth. These basic assumptions represent cognitive structures or interpretive schemes that people use to perceive situations and to make sense of ongoing events, activities, and human relationships, thereby forming the basis for collective action (Reichers and Schneider 1990; Sackmann 1992; Sapienza 1985; Van Maanen and Barley 1985). Basic assumptions are formed over time as members of a group develop strategies to cope with problems and pass along the strategies to new members (Van Maanen and Barley 1985).

Culture is manifested through artifacts and creations which are the most visible manifestations of culture. These artifacts may include such things as art, technology, and visible and audible behavior patterns as well as myths, heroes, language, rituals, and ceremony (Pettigrew 1979). While cultural artifacts are the most observable of the three levels, they are also the hardest to decipher in terms of their underlying cultural meanings. An important point to be made is that certain artifacts, such as information technology, are not culturally neutral and may come to symbolize a host of different values driven by underlying assumptions and their meaning, use, and consequences (Coombs et al. 1992; Feldman and March 1981; Robey and Markus 1984; Scholz 1990). Culture is certainly based on something more than “place”. Turning to a dictionary definition, we might read that culture is the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought and further, these patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population.
The women characters in the novels of Banerjee develop multiple consciousnesses, resulting in a self that is neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented. As the women perceive both their race and sexuality through new and different lenses throughout the course of the texts, they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is a fallacy, and that the reality of the South Asian diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity. This multiplicity is a significant plight for the characters, for as their different consciousnesses contradict each other, the women are left uncertain as to the nature of their identities, and not knowing where they fit in American society. Yet paradoxically, it is this very condition of multiplicity that provides the means by which the conflict of consciousness can be resolved for the characters. While Du Bois’s article in *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader* says that double consciousness is a negative aspect of the black man's psyche, multiple consciousness appears ultimately to be a positive psychological element, a possible solution to the tensions that arise from cross-cultural adaptation (98). In the same way, women that Divakaruni create are capable of living in a world in which the individual exists not as a unified One, but rather as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibilities of creating consciousness and inventing identities.

The domestic realm for these women in *The Mistress of Spices* comes to represent all that is "traditional," specifically in terms of sexuality. In Indian culture, sexuality is repressed, male-dominated, and most often seen as a negative aspect of female identity. In her book *Becoming American, Being- Indian*, Madhulika S. Khandelwal remarks upon the relationship between Indian culture and sexuality, suggesting that such a relationship is based upon the desire to retain cultural values: "Indians' widespread belief that sexual freedom was a hallmark of American society placed them on guard with Americans, as it did with their own U.S. - reared children, particularly their daughters. [...] Indian culture perceives sexuality itself as dangerous to the values of the traditional Indian family, thus within the home it remains, as much does, under the control of the patriarch.

Padma Rangaswamy suggests that the image of the subservient Indian woman stems from Indian mythology and the manner in which Indian females are represented in
it. "...An image of womanhood that has a profound effect on the Indian psyche is that of Sita, the heroine of India's most beloved epic, The Ramayana. Sita's chastity, obedience, and unflinching loyalty to her husband represent the ideal path for an Indian wife. This ideology survives even among modern, upper-class Indian women who defer to their husbands in an almost instinctive way."(148) The inordinate amount of emphasis placed on Indian women to be "domestic goddesses" results in constructing the home as a place where time and space cease to function according to normal patterns and instead become frozen in the practices and mores of ancient Indian mythology and culture.

From the views of Padma Rangaswamy, it is clearly known that the identity of the South Asian diasporic woman cannot be categorized as simply Eastern or Western, submissive or dominant, but rather it is comprised of numerous consciousnesses that encompass various conflicting characteristics.(149) The manner in which Divakaruni's characters perceive themselves is based upon this multiplicity of selves, and the notion that one's relation to one's surrounding space determines the process and outcome of self-perception allows for paradoxical views of the self to exist, thereby deconstructing the concept of identity as unified and perception as singular. For these women, to exist is to be many; it is to embrace the paradoxes of perception that arise as life is lived astride the boundaries of many worlds. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents multiple consciousnesses as an identity that is "in between" such oppositional states, characterized by being neither rather than both.

India is a land of culture and holding much superstition. Preserving the culture is the prestige of all countries. People of a country have pride to reveal their own cultural identity wherever they go. But some like to stripe off their own cultural identity and ready to put on a new culture when they stay abroad and some wear foreign culture as an over coat of the old shirt of their own cultural value. Chitra Banerjee’s novels are an evidence to prove it. Her novels portray the possibility for establishing a bicultural identity. Divakaruni’s approach to ethnic identity is contingent within the view of south Asian Diaspora that believes in the necessity of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience.
As the food and culture is a key characteristic of a diaspora is that a strong sense of connection to a homeland is maintained through cultural practices and ways of life. Among these culinary culture has an important part to play in diasporic identification. Food is the medium for depicting the emotional, ceremonial and ritual universe of people. As in the simple and complex conjunctions of food and art among the Hindus of Bengal, the traditional life of Bengal is rich in form, ritual and aesthetics.

Food, in that cultural mindset is not only something to be consumed for survival, but also an artistic medium. It provides the raw material for painting and making offerings to the gods: it enhanced personal experience when it shape, colour and became metaphor for human existence it acquires symbolic meaning and enriched social customs with ceremonial value. Researching novels like Queen of Dreams has helped chitra Divakaruni stay in touch with her Indian heritage. She asked her mother to send a lot of Bengali books on the tradition of dream interpretation. It is a real way for her to remember how people think about things in her culture. She is sharing those memories with a growing audience.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents multiple consciousness as an identity that is "in between" such oppositional states, characterized by being neither rather than both. In The Mistress of Spices, the process of self-perception is the foundation of identity formation for the central character Tilotamma (Tilo). As Tilo strives to define herself as South Asian and American, she develops multiple consciousnesses that manifest themselves in both her experiences and her subsequent relationships with her racial and sexual identities. While Tilo is living in America, she is incapable of pure self-perception, and can only see herself through the eyes of those around her, leaving her own self-seeing as a secondary and almost marginal perspective. Tilo views herself through her surrounding society, thereby leading to various and often conflicting simultaneous visions of her identity. She finds that she is in fact comprised of the numerous identities.

The result of this knowledge is Tilo's recognition of her multiple consciousnesses, and although this multiplicity replete with contradictions, Divakaruni nevertheless presents it as a possible "solution" for Tilo's dilemma of cross-cultural identity formation. An older woman born with supernatural abilities in a small village in India, Tilo's gift is
her ability to elicit specific powers inherent in spices and use them to cure the maladies of those around her. When Tilo was a girl, pirates storm into her home and they murder her entire family and abduct Tilo, taking her on board their ship as a prisoner. Eventually, Tilo overthrows the pirate captain to become the pirate. But Tilo abandons this exalted position when mystical sea serpents tell her about the existence of an island upon which she, and other women like her, can develop their supernatural talents to use them for a greater good. This isolated island is a haven for these women, who call themselves the "Mistresses of Spices" and are under the care of the First Mother, the eldest and wisest teacher of all the women.

The women in The Mistresses of Spices are trained in the art of listening and controlling the spices, and are then sent forth into the greater world to aid humanity. After Tilo learns all that she can, she is sent to Oakland, California, to a tiny Indian spice shop where she must begin her duties of healing the masses. Thus, she is thrust into the chaos of American life and the newness of a culture to which she must adapt. Although Tilo has already begun her diasporic journey, she does not feel the loss of a home, but rather a finding of many. Tilo sails upon a ship to the island of the Mistresses, a reference to the kalipani, or "dark water," the term used in order to describe the journey made immigrants from the motherland of India to other foreign lands, creating what we today refer to as the "diaspora." Already, Divakaruni presents Tilo as inextricably entangled in the workings of the diaspora, and the entire notion of "home" becomes displaced, transformed into an intangible condition that is not based on a singular location but rather a movement among many places.

When Tilo arrives on the Island, she and the other young girls like her are given new identities, indicating that the past is being relegated to memory and new personas are being forged. Tilo meets the First Mother, a figure who foreshadows the paradoxical identity that Tilo will soon find herself grappling with. The First Mother is elderly and maternal, representing the traditionalist notion of the South Asian woman in the domestic sphere. Yet at the same time, she is outside the boundaries of conventional culture, for she lives on an isolated island, possesses magical powers and urges the young girls toward progression and change rather than the maintenance of the status quo. She is at
once the "old world and the "new," a juxtaposition of differing geographical spaces, times and cultures.

The Island is the first diasporic space that we encounter, and while it exhibits the ambiguity as America does, Divakaruni clearly genders the island differently than she later will America. The Island exudes femininity - specifically, Divakaruni constructs it as a maternal space with the figure of the First Mother and the presence of only females on the island. The Island nurtures Tilo, educating and preparing her for the next stage of life she will encounter when she leaves, and also imbuing Tilo with a sense of singularity of identity. While its women learn and grow, the Island itself never changes- the daily routines of the Mistresses remain the same and an ambiance of group unity amongst all females is fostered. Such community cohesion and support will later contrast sharply with the multiplicity and solitude that Divakaruni presents as indicative of the diasporic experience of America.

The terms of gender and the diaspora to Du Bois's model of double consciousness and Prashad' s South Asian version of this consciousness, the psyche of the individual is completely transformed. What emerges is a consciousness exemplified by multiplicity, that thrives on the contradiction of oppositional constructs, and whose only definable essence is that of paradox. The methods of the formation of identity and the creation of consciousness for South Asian diasporic women continue to evolve, and while the development of identity dominates the process of assimilation for this generation of women, the complexities and paradoxes that will emerge in future diasporic generations will no doubt yield new means and mechanisms that will redefine what it means to be a South Asian woman in America.

Rakhi’s coffee house becomes a site for a vibrant multicultural assembly in the transformed Kurma House International, people move across borders and boundaries. While examining the production of a “Public culture” within a postcolonial setting, Appadurai makes a note that despite a “global cultural economy.” Aihwa Ong defines transnationalism to refer to: “The cultural specificities of global process, tracing the multiplicity of the uses and conceptions of culture.” (Aihwa, Ong. 4) Inderpal Grewal and
Karen Kaplan also theorize the various uses of the term ‘transnational’ in their essay “Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational studies of sexuality.” The protagonist of the novel moves in between her past with ancient past cultural heritage and the American realities in which she lives. The novel primarily deals with the Indian women migrated to America, carrying their culture into American culture. Rakhi’s mother possesses magic power, a kind of supernatural power with which she reads and interprets the dreams and tells its good as well bad consequences. Rakhi with her painting paints an imaginary India.

Soumyajyoti Banerjee and Amrita Basu in their article on International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies express their views that as the outside world (in the novel the American society) is non-compliant with Indian ways, it becomes important to revive the Indian tradition by eating Indian food at home. Nation and food are historically inextricably joined. To feel part of a particular nation, to ‘keep one’s culture’, when one lives in a foreign land, can necessarily involve food of the native land as connect (129). Rakhi hears her father share mythical stories from the Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata regarding the history of various Indian food items with Sonny and his friends. Previously Rakhi had ridiculed Indian food for their long preparation time. Now she gets to know about their links with ancient Indian history. India begins to take a webbed shape with numerous space-time links between the past and the present. All of a sudden India starts becoming a demystified nation which cannot be pinned down to any specialized discourse, precisely because there is no specialized discourse which can define a nation.

A lot of her work deals with the immigrant experience, and in her novel, The Mistress of Spices (1997), the reader can find more “types” of immigrants within the South-Asian community, each of them trying to adjust to their new situation in their own way. Haroun, the cab-driver, fled Dal lake where generations of his family had rowed shikaras for tourists. He lands in America as an illegal immigrant, but, like everyone else, dreams of making it in this new land. He seems destined to be a victim. After his family was shot by rebels, after shovelling coal on the ship that brought him to America, working in a car shop and as a road worker, or for a rich Indian lady who treated him as if
they were still in India, he starts working as a cab driver for a fellow Kashmiri, hoping that one day he will be able to own his car. He gets robbed and wounded one night, barely makes it to his room, yet in the end finds in his neighbour’s friends who are like a real family to him, and even true love waits for him: “Haroun who has so much to live for, for whom the immigrant dream has come true in a way he never thought.” (MS 284)

Jagjit is a ten-and-a-half-year old boy when he makes his first appearance in the story. all as "wild bamboo”, shy and very attached to his mother, he still speaks only Punjabi and he is made fun of in school by the other children because of his accent, his traditional clothes and his turban which covers his uncut hair: “In the playground they try to pull it off his head, green turban the color of a parrot’s breast. They dangle the cloth from their fingertips and laugh at his long, uncut hair. And push him down.” (MS 134) Alone, with no friends in this new and cruel world, he stays awake at night, staring at the stars and thinking about his grandmother, left behind in their country. With parents “too worn with work and worry in a strange land to hear him, Jagjit who went home each day from America to a house so steeped in Punjabi [...] who held his cries in until red swam behind his eyelids like bleeding stars” (121) is an easy pray for the members of a street gang, confusing their interest in him for friendship. Finally feeling that he has friends, “they're like my brothers, better than my brothers” (121), he is lured into the gang by gifts: “…sullen in his T-shirt and baggy Girbaud jeans and untied laces, the uniform of young America, speaking its staccato rhythms already” (121), he is asked to do small favours in return, and he dreams of being older, wearing the gang members' jacket, carrying the same switch-blade and maybe, one day, even being given a gun, which he considers to be his “passport into real America” (121).

Neeraj Agnihotri in his article, “Diasporic Consciousness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Sister of My Heart.” says that the journey of immigration of women writers is closely followed by the journey into settlement and the journey into self. Women writers present the dilemmas which women are facing in the alien land. Liberal and unconventional ways of life are desired to avoid the problems within traditional society. Thus self-willed and individualistic women often face suffering caused by broken relationships. The new woman that emerges out of women’s writings is not
necessarily a revolutionary transformation of the convention but who gives literary expression to changes and challenges arising in the real social world. (2) The diasporic women writings represent the women who are forms of cultural hybridization that reflect the experience and social positioning of the authors themselves. These women in diasporic literature show an inexorable awakening of identity in relation to western values of individuality and independence. The women go on to asserting and exploring their own identity, even when it reverts back to traditional concept.

Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee’s major novels such as The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, The Vine of Desire and Queen of Dreams clearly deal about women’s problem. In her works, the hybridization gradually starts, Americanization creeps in and cultural indicators have no distinct mark. Transformation in characterization becomes clear; then there is a time when she wants to forget her past and questions its being. The women characters in her novels though ready to play an active part in the new culture still peep alive their old tradition in their dressing of food habits or even home decor. One of the commonest problems faced by the immigrants is racial discrimination. One may find Banerjee’s protagonists attacked by the whites who resent the browned-skinned people who, the whites think, are over-crowding their land. Violence or verbal abuse turns out to be an intrinsic part of the life of the expatriates.

Divakaruni’s Sister of My Heart is an expanded version of her earlier short story ‘Ultrasound’ in the Arranged Marriage. This novel spins around two cousins Anju and Sudha Chatterjee who are born few hours apart from each other on the same day. Since the day they were born, Sudha and Anju have been bonded in ways even their mothers cannot comprehend. Urged into marriages, their lives take sudden opposite turns with Anju in India and Sudha in America. But the women discover that, despite the distance that has grown between them, they have only each other to turn to. They grow up in a very conservative upper-middle class home consisting solely of women-mothers, aunts and the maid. Although their personalities and ambitions are in contrast, they are intensely close friends and soul mates.

There is a sharp contrast between the lives of both Sudha and Anju. On the one hand Sudha spends her whole day in performing household duties while Anju drives
freely; performing outdoor works on her own, studies her favourite subject in college. But still the dissatisfaction in Anju’s life makes her think, “It’s not what I imagined my American life would be like” (SH 132). Life brings them to the same stage of life when they both become pregnant. Sudha’s mother-in-law forces her to abort the female child foetus and no reaction of her husband against it, shatters her. She decides to keep the child and moves to America, since the life as a single mother and a divorcee would be easier for her in California. Anju starts collecting money through a job for air ticket of Sudha. This job makes her feel the power of economic independence. Due to physical exhaustion and mental stress Anju suffers a miscarriage. Sudha and her daughter Dayita is the only hope that would give Anju energy to forget the loss of her baby.

While Anju and Sudha begin to seek ways of fulfilling their dreams of self reliance in America, the new setting creates major rifts in relationships. Chitra in The Vine of Desire highlights the cultural changes of the characters. Few years after her settlement in America, transforms Anju in her usage of peculiar words and interests. Her shrinking memories of India make Sudha realize that even their memories are marooned on separate islands. As Sunil, though outwardly assimilated could not tolerate Lalit’s intimacy either with Sudha or with Anju. His rage in turn targets a fight with a valet who comments over the Indians in the party, “Fucking Indians, showing off”. (V.D 167)

The alien land seems to create the need of assimilation and transformation for the immigrants. But behavioural changes are hardly acceptable in accordance with the new culture.

Sudha realizes that she cannot go back to the old restricted ways of Indian life. She somehow feels secure for the impersonal customs of America to start a new life. She thinks standing at the corner of a road, “I must be emanating some type of distress signal, because passerby stares at me strangely. If this were India, at least half of them would know me. They’d ask me a thousand questions, offer to help, give advice, may be even escort me back home” (VD 178). Not only Sudha but Anju and Sunil also trace new paths for them after deciding for a divorce. Anju begins her self-searching journey keeping distance with all closed ones. She shares room with one of her friends from writer’s club but their belonging to different lands could not make a comfortable companionship
between them. She always wants Sudha close to her to share and understand her fully. Anju feels like tingles in fingertips like pins and needles when any of her American friends criticizes about the heritage which she loves a lot. Even their everyday talks are so different that she feels lonely among them. She understands that, “…large chunks of herself will always be unintelligible to them: the joint family she grew up in, her arranged marriage, the way she fell in love with her husband, the tension in her household, that ménage a trios Indian style” (VD 98)

Sudha becomes a caretaker of an old Indian man who is living with his son and his American wife. He suffers more from mental sickness than physical. He wants to return to his own land (India). The foreign land has badly affected his health. Sudha understands his pain and promise him to take him to India. She cooks Indian dishes for him, calls him Baba and leaves Dayita to play with him. Subsequently this improves the old man’s health. She is excited with her own bank account but leaving the old relations is the only regret. Sudha’s clear refusal to Ashok, friendship with Lalit, leaving Sunil and decision of returning India with the old and with a deal of serving him in turn for a good school for her daughter are surely the characteristics of the changed ‘self’ in America, One can take a new body there, shrug off old identities.

An article of Neeraj Agnihotri in Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research journal. concludes that having gone through the story of two sisters it can be said that whatever may be the cause of immigration; diasporic community faces the problem of displacement, rootlessness, discrimination and marginalization in the migrated country. The women, who are migrated, feel the displacement intensely more in comparison to men, but also they use migration as a step towards their freedom and individuality. Though it is troublesome for them to detach themselves from the native country and customs but still they adapt the new culture and try to create a harmony with the new surroundings. America offers freedom but at the price of losing a stable, perhaps privileged identity.

Banerjee’s writing affirms that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion but an experience made up of collectivities and multiple journeys. It’s an experience that is determined by who travels, where, how and under what circumstances. Almost all the
expatriates who emigrated from India to America face the clash of opposing cultures, a feeling of alienation which is followed by the attempts to adjust, to adopt and to accept. Only the degree of this adaptation differs according to the generations. Banerjee had moved away from her location, through this work she recollects her homeland, and as an outsider observes details with objectivity. It reflects as a reminder of her identity. Chitra Banerjee thus analyses the relationship of women with universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance and disorder thus articulating the diasporic consciousness in this work.

Diasporic communities do not come apart from the association with their homelands, but strengthen different relations. Their sense of nostalgia for the homeland, an interested attachment to its traditions, religions and languages produce diasporic literature. This kind of literature is mainly concerned with the individual's or community's attachment to the native soil. Avtar Brah in his work *Cartographics of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* points out that “The diaspora communities are forged out of multiple imaginative journeys between the old country and the new country.” (183) The migrants have an unbreakable attachment to the custom and traditions of their homeland. Because of this they fail to construct a home in the new home which is finely reflected in their literature and art. The migrants cross the borders of time, memory and history with the vision and dreams of returning to their native soil. The craving for the homeland is countered by the desire to belong to the new home.

Raghavendra’s article in *Indian Streams Research Journal* views that whatever may be the reason for migration; diaspora community faces the problem of dislocation, rootlessness, discrimination and marginalization in the foreign country. The women, who are migrated, feel the dislocation intensely more in comparison to men, but they use migration as a step towards their freedom and individuality. Though it is difficult for them to detach themselves from the native country and customs but still they adapt the new culture and try to create a harmony with the new surroundings. America puts forward freedom but at the cost of losing a stable, perhaps privileged identity.

Raimule’s article in the journal, *Research Today* says that Divakaruni brings about the contrasting cultures of India’s and the US. The novel constantly focuses on the
transculture; the characters seem to shuttling between two worlds. Loss alienation, rootlessness and dislocation is experienced by every immigrant. The expatriates, initially try to adjust with the new culture and society into which they moved But at the same time they are not willing to follow the new land’s culture completely. The consciousness of uprooting from the native environment creates emotional setbacks and raises the question of belonging and not belonging. This is a revelation that ‘home’ connotes not only physical distances but harbours passions attached with people and surroundings, and ambience shared characteristics of a native land. The yearning for home and nostalgia for homeland becomes a constant presence as it always seems to ponder the psyche of the expatriates.

The Indians living in the alien countries continue to live in a double life refusing to give up their cultural roots. They are sandwiched between the deep rooted native culture and assimilated host culture. There is a flux of hope for assimilation in the new land, at the same time there is invariable magnetic pull towards home land. The nostalgia and yearning for home and cultural conflicts in the intricately woven fiction, “The Vine of Desire” by the Indian born American, diasporic women writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who artistically blends the traumatic challenges with optimistic attributes sprouting out of dishevelled tensions experienced in multicultural societies.

Divakaruni's writing insists that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion but an experience fabricated of collectivities and multiple journeys. It's an experience that is determined by the traveller, where, how and under what circumstances one travels. Most of the expatriates who move to America from India face the conflict of opposing cultures, a feeling of alienation which is followed by the attempts to adjust, to adopt and to accept. The degree of this adaptation differs according to the generations. Divakaruni had travelled away from her location, through this work she recollects her homeland, and as an outsider observes elements with objectivity. It mirrors as a reminder of her identity. In this way Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni interprets the relationship of women with universal problems of discrimination, dislocation, disturbance and disorder by expressing the diasporic consciousness in her novel Sister of My Heart.
The existing scholarship shows quite clearly that a variety of readings that combine contemporary theories of exile and hybridity can be applied to *The Mistress of Spices* in a productive and legitimate way. These mostly “reality based” and rationally configured approaches may nevertheless not account for the vast spiritual foundations of this particular novel, with the presence of myth and magic that defines the narrative (Rajan 2002).

A number of major issues seem to be of a particular interest in *The Mistress of Spices* if we want to read the novel from a larger spiritual perspective that may draw on Post-Jungian analytical psychology, an approach that does not compete well for its place in today’s academia. At the center of this novel of Divakaruni, an uncanny encounter in Oakland, California, between an Indian “mistress of spices,” a young woman hidden in the disguise of an old recluse, Tilo, and a socially successful descendant of the First Nations, Raven. In the Jungian sense of the conjunction of the opposites, the novel thus plays with the binaries that do not preclude one another. Tilo chose to be magically transported to Oakland in order to help her own community; she has to abide by a number of strict rules, remain hidden and non-assuming. But circumstances push her on the path of identity quest that can only be accomplished if she accepts the possibility of her own change as she is recognized beyond the outer appearance for her deepest nature. The same goes for the male character, Raven, who needs to open up and accept his heritage, starting with his own identification with the mythical figure of a raven that holds numerous connotations in both Indian and Native American culture.

In other words, the ethical dimensions are quite overtly examined in Divakaruni’s novels: how a personal fate, karma, affects the events on the scale of a major earthquake, which will lead to a necessary shift in perception and to a major transformation of all those involved in the process. Here again, a cyclical view of time suggests periods of apparent calm that are followed by life-changing destructions. The perception that we always progress in circles or rather in spirals, under the influence of more or less balanced forces, takes us back to the Eastern experience of human existence. Lastly, with a major shifting of the earth (during an earthquake) placed at the end of *The Mistress of Spices*, which corresponds to a symbolic shifting of how life is to be understood, the
writer positions Tilo and her spices at the center of the interaction between races and cultures.

The total illumination in the *Bhagavad-Gīṭa* at the center of the *Mahābhārata* that has marked Indian thinking and living for ages could certainly not be reproduced in Divakaruni’s narrative. The major reason resides in Panchaali’s position at the battlefield as an observer, but may also be found in the general influence of the *Bhagavad-Gīṭa* on Indian philosophy that could not be easily dealt with in a contemporary novel. As we have seen, Divakaruni nevertheless assigns Krishna a major role in Panchaali’s life and especially during her passing. The revelation that comes to Panchaali in the end, that of peace and love, with all conflicts gone, makes her understand the before and the after, together with the nature of the cosmic fire of transformation through which she was pushed into earthly existence.

When teaching *The Palace of Illusions* or *The Mistress of Spices* in a graduate critical theory seminar, one should be reminded that the worldview such as grounded in Hinduist tradition will continue to be a difficult riddle to the large majority of Western students. Even with the help of Luce Irigaray’s *Between East and West* (Irigaray 2002), one of the rare attempts in Western philosophy to bridge the many gaps between the basic values promoted in various areas of the world, the initial cultural differences, and thus limitations, are not easily uprooted, although they may be partly overcome. Divakaruni’s novels nevertheless offer new generations of potential literary scholars some material on which to dwell for years to come. In this regard, Divakaruni’s novels may in time bring about a wider perspective on literature and life. Chitra Banarjee’s women are liberated as Geeta but her use of mysticism unlocked from Hindu mythologies adds to the infusion of paradoxical elements into her characters. The alternating strand of meaning underneath the metaphor of the spice Turmeric which she borrows from the mythological story of ‘Devas and Asuras’, considered as a shield for heart’s sorrow, an ointment of death and hope of rebirth. The mistress tries to cure Lalitha Ahuja’s wife with this turmeric when she feels deserted by her husband leaving her long to have a child of her own, to fill the emptiness in her life.
Even in while self anointing herself, the mistress enjoys the liberty of alluding to the story of Tilottama, the beautiful dancer, and Apsara at Indra’s court and how she was banished to live a mortal life for seven ages. Her characters like Lalitha find solace only when they dared to step away from the pre ordained life of passivity and helplessness. Hameeda too suffers a lot in the hands of her husband but starts life afresh, ironically with help from his brother which is stark reminder bout the inherent paradoxes involved in the lives of women in this novel. She even attends classes to learn English to make her own living in America and to bring up her daughter. The contradictions are just not limited to the physical or social space alone. While flight to advanced societies are reasoned by prospects of economic betterment, in this novel disparities in economic values and opportunities come to the fore. Women find a mini replica of their substandard stature in the patriarchal society in their homeland here too, mainly because of the economic disparities. However, Chitra Banerjee not only poses the questions but also offers solution to her women characters by suggesting practical ways of finding emancipation and financial assurance, often through vocational work.

Tradition claims its easy prey in women which is clearly represented by the character Pishima, the sister of Anju’s father, widowed at an early age and even denied opportunity to continue studies, condemned to the kitchen for always. She shorn of everything she could have got lives a life of utter dependence. And quite paradoxically, Gourima, the mother of Anju, is shown in contrast to the character of Pishi assuming dominance in running the household after the death of her husband. She handles the bookshop and even takes care of the two daughters, Sudha and Anju, their studies, and even the widows, Nalini and Pishi. She even neglects her health, while struggling hard to take over the family without hurting the traditions of the Chatterjees. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s literature brings about a fine synthesis, a new version of how in the past decades, the (often stereotypical) representations of East (in Western culture) have been transformed and adapted to the needs of rapidly changing circumstances, both in literature and in everyday life. Thus, it is seen that Indians even in an alien world are accustomed to the Indian culture despite their struggle between the old strict tradition and the challenge proved by their new life. Most of the stories we have discussed above, present the difficulties faced by the Indian wives in an alien culture without 'the company
of friends or relatives, while struggling to cope with the new surroundings they cannot call their home.

In Calcutta, it is the belief of the people that Bidhata Purush, the god of destiny will come to bless the newborn child and the demons will also accompany with him: “The old tales say this also: in the wake of the Bidhata Purush come the demons, for that is the world’s nature, good and evil mingled. That is why they leave an oil lamp burning. That is why they place the sacred tuli leaf under the baby’s pillow for protection.” (S.H:15) In the same way, while sudha stayed up on the terrace with Pishi to guard the pickles from the black-faced monkeys which appeared magically. Anju thought that they must have been escaped from the Alipur Zoo, but Ramdin-mudi, who owned the corner grocery, insisted that they are ‘descendants of the god Hanuman’. Pishi told about Sudha’s parents that her father Gopal, played the flute well as sweetly as his namesake Gopal, the god Krishna (S.H:35) Her mother Nalini felt cheated and compared herself with Karna: “as each year rolled like Karma’s iron wheel towards its end, the lines of discontent took over her face like spider webs do on an abandoned house.”(S.H:39)

India is the land of culture and holding much superstition. Preserving the culture is the prestige of all countries. People of a country have pride to reveal their own cultural identity wherever they go. But Some like to stripe off their own cultural identity and ready to put on a new culture when they stay abroad and some wear the foreign culture as an over coat of the old shirt of their own cultural value. Chitra Banerjee’s novels are an evidence to prove it. The character ‘Tilo’ in The Mistress of Spices knows the medical property of the spices with which she could manage the spice shop which is the symbol of primitive cultural value.

Mostly the uneducated persons have superstitious beliefs. Even though science proves that there is no truth in giving importance to such beliefs, it is very hard to eradicate this notion from the mind of such ignorant people. In The Mistress of Spices also the novelist has expressed the superstititious beliefs of the people of Calcutta. Tilo helps the immigrants from India in California by providing a particular spice for the immigrant’s mental and physical ailments. The novelist has not only highlights the medical properties of the spices but also she has expressed the magical power in each
spice. The magical power of it, is a mere superstition to prove the aroma to the text to appetite the reader to chew the novel. She has beautifully combined the concept of magic and realism through blending the medical properties and the magical power of the spices.

Tilo introduced herself as she was the mistress of spices and seemed to ask the readers whether they had forgotten the old secrets of their mothers’ mothers knew about the medicinal value of the spices at our home. There was an embedded hint about Tilo’s anxiousness in the preservation of Indian customs and superstition by the immigrants in the foreign countries: “Here is one of them again: vanilla beans soaked soft in goat’s milk and rubbed on the wrist bone can guard against the evil eye. And here another: a measure of pepper at the foot of the bed shaped into a crescent cures you of nightmare. […] Bolts of fabric dyed in age-old colors, New Year yellow, harvest green, bride’s luck red.” (M.S:4)

The swastic sign is used to paint on the walls of village homes for good luck in Calcutta. (M.S:181) and it is the custom of Hindu culture to hang mango leaves for luck at the entrance door. Tilo in her shop had also hung the mango leaves for luck and she told a customer who had the Indian dishes such as burfis, rosogollas and, laddus to reveal her Indian identity: “This is what the customers see as they enter, ducking under plastic-green mango leaves strung over the door for luck” […] Out of their mother’s kichens. Emerald-green burfis, rosogollas white as dawn and, made from lentil flour, laddus like nuggets of gold.” (M.S:4&5)

Applying turmeric on the face is the custom of Indian women and it gives not only beauty but also cures the blemishes on the face. (M.S:13) Tilo spoke about the power of turmeric and instructs how to apply it on the face and she said that each spice has a day special to it: “Rub it on cheek, forehead, and chin. Don’t be hesitant. For a thousand years before history began brides and those who long to be brides have done the same. It will erase blemishes and wrinkles, suck away age and fat. For days afterward, your skin will give off a pale golden glow.”(M.S:13)

Tilo further told about the origin of the spice and its sacred qualities which shows the Culture of India. She said that turmeric which is also named halud, meaning yellow,
color of daybreak and conch shell sound and it is the preserver, keeping foods safe in a land of heat and hunger. It is considered as an auspicious spice, placed on the heads of newborns for luck, sprinkled over coconuts at pujas, rubbed into the borders of wedding saris and she accepted that turmeric is the shield for heart’s sorrow, anointment for death, hope for rebirth.(M.S:14)

Tilo could find out what was happening in the immigrants’ home through the various images which came to her mind. One of it was the image of a girl child and the advice of her mother who corrected her to sit properly and the other custom of Indian women’s eating after the men at home had their food is also expressed in the novel. In India, the village girls have the habit of tying their hair into a single braid or two braids: “A girl and her hair tied in twin tight braids, oiled and obedient, her legs pressed together the way her mother has told her nice girls sit.”(MS 65). It is the custom of Indian wives especially house wives to eat food after serving the men in the family: “Kheer today after so long and there’s enough after father and Elder Brother have been served, enough even for Mother who eats always last of all.”(M.S:65)

Daksha, an immigrant came to Tilo’s shop with white nurse’s uniform to buy some cracked wheat to make a dalia putting for her mother-in-law as the day was ‘ekadasi’ on which day the widow would not take. This custom in India is still observed in some orthodox families. She said to Tilo: “Aunty today is ekadasi you know, eleventh day of the moon, and my mother-in-law being a widow must not eat rice. So I thought maybe some cracked wheat to make a dalia pudding for her.”(M:S:82) Like wise the grand father of Geeta also praised the Indian culture and scolded Geeta when she cut her hair in the American style and he praised about the simplicity of Indian women:

“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.”(M:S:89). […] Or. “That Geeta, how much makeup she is using all the time. Uff, in my days only the Englishwomen and prostitutes are doing that. Good Indian girls are not ashamed of the face God is giving them. You cannot think what all she is taking with her even to work.”(M:S:89)[…] You must do
what is best for her. Even from birth a girl’s real home is with her future husband’s family only.”[...] Can you see me with a veil over my head sitting in a sweaty kitchen all day, a bunch of house keys tied to the end of my sari. (M.S:91)

Giving importance to one’s own community and underestimating other low class community is quite common in some families in India. Geeta’s grand father was still holding the difference even though he lived in America. When he came to know that his grand daughter wished to marry a man of low caste, he could not bear it and spoke ill about the community: “You are losing your caste and putting blackest kali on our ancestors’ faces to marry a man who is not even a sahib, whose people are slum criminals and illegal.” (M.S:92&93)[...]Because in our community it is a shame if a grown girls sits in the house not married and I did not want to shame them.(M.S:104)

The beliefs: ‘laughing will end in sorrow’ and ‘one’s fate is ordained in the birth’ still exist in India. Kwesi, an immigrant who wished and struggled hard to start a dojo, asked Tilo’s permission to paste the poster of his dojo. He said: “We are laughing but there’s a raw edge to it, a laugh that knows how easily it could have turned to weeping. A laugh like this, when you share it, loosens the knots in the heart.”(M.S:124). In some other occasion, when Geeta was telling about her love on Juan to whom she wished to marry, the elders in her family opposed to it. She got upset. At that time Tilo wished to console her by repeating the Old One’s words which are related to the belief of Indian. The Old One taught it to them many times: “Your fate is born with you stitched into your birth stars. Who can you blame for it?” (M.S:144)

India is noted for yoga and meditation. And the people have the belief on the power of names. The author has included them in the novel. Tilo would sit in lotus asana silently on Monday: “For Monday is the day of silence, day of the whole white mung bean which is sacred to the moon. On Mondays I go to the inner room and sit in the lotus asana.”(M.S:155)Old One warned Tilo before her leaving from the island; “a true name has power, and when you tell it you give that power into your listener’s hands.” (M.S:172)
Raven, an American and the lover of Tilo, also showed real interest in Indian culture and especially Indian food. He had a special interest in them and on Tilo. Tilo felt that some of the Indians themselves leaving their traditional values and she said, “My American, how you have romanticized my land and my people. The Indian culture isn’t quite what you think,” (M.S:226)

In America, the Bougainville girls approached Tilo to get a recipe of an Indian dish to prepare at the time of their competition. Tilo also decided to help them. So she started telling about the preparation of vegetable pulao: “I tell her how it’s cooked, the water measured and boiled, the Basmati soaked just the right amount of time, and the kesar sprinkled in, the peas, the roasted cashews and fried onions for garnish. I list the spices: clove, cardamom, cinnamon, a pinch of sugar. Ghee. Maybe a dusting of black pepper. (M.S:271)

Chitra Banerjee blended not only fact with fiction but also superstitious beliefs of Calcutta such as it is believed that the juice of the flower aparajita smeared on eyelids leads one to victory, lanka, fire child, is supposed to be the cleanser of evil, (M.S:39) The pial tree whose ashes rubbed on limbs bring vigor, (M.S:43) and coriander seed for clear sight when one soaks it and drinks the water, it purges one of old guilts. (M.S:72) The amchur which is made from black salt and mangoes dried and pounded, to heal the taste buds to bring back love of live. (M.S:72&73)

After she had taught the novices about the common cures, the Old One told them that different spices may help them to solve different troubles. For each person, there was one special spice. But the Mistress must never use the spices for their own ends. It is said by her: “Mahamul is to enhance fortune, to bring success or joy, to avert ill luck. When you do not know how else to help someone, you must go deep into your being and search out the mahamul.”(M.S:74)

She added that tulsi (basil) which is the plant of humility, curber of ego. It is described that basil as a sacred leaf to Sri Ram, slakes the craving for power and turns the thoughts inward away from worldliness (M.S:79): The gram ‘Hartuki’ to help mothers bear the pain that starts with the birthing and continues forever, the pain and joy both,
tangled dark and blue as an umbilical cord around an infant’s throat, (M.S:80) Amla is for a different resistance (M.S:83) and for a fat man she could take a fistful of mustard seed and say a word, and for a month a fever would burn in one’s stomach, making one vomit up whatever he ate. Tilo would help others with the spices: I pound Geetha’s father a powder of almond and kesar to boil in milk. “The whole family must drink it at bedtime, “I say, “To sweeten your words and thoughts, to remember the love buried under the anger. […] When bitterness boils up in your mouth, wanting out, swallow it down with a spoon of this draksha syrup.” (M.S:94)

Tilo listed so many spices and their uses such as fennel which is the best for the middle-aged people who take a pinch of it, raw and whole, after every meal to freshen the breath and aid digestion and give them mental strength for what must be done.” (M.S:109) It cools the temper as well. (M.S:109). It is superstitiously believed that it brings amity where it nests, spice to digest sorrows and in their digestion make us strong. (M.S:111) and also a bag of dried neem leaves, dipped in honey and pressed against the skin, is best for healing. (M.S:114) she continued to tell about them:

“Sandalwood is for soothing over hurt, Ivory for endurance.” (M.S:115) The cinnamon is the strength-giver, cinnamon friend-maker, what have we done. (M.S:127) The bottle of mango pickled in mustard oil into which Tilo added methi for healing breaks and ada for the deeper courage which knows when to say no, and also amchur for deciding right. (M.S:145) “Peppercorn which has the ability to sweat your secrets out of you.”

The novelist includes the instruction about the recipe of the spices. The Old One advised: “Makaradwaj most potent of the changing spices must be handled with most respect to handle properly otherwise it can bring madness or death whatever a person weighs, measure out one thousandth of it, and mix in milk and amla fruit. It must be sipped slowly, one spoon an hour, over three nights and days.” (M.S:278).

It is the custom of the people of Calcutta is revealed much in Sister of my Heart. It is the practice of them to leave sweetmeats by the cradle, expecting for the Bidhata
Purush, the god of destiny. It is said in the old tales that the first night after a child is born, the Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be. (S.H:15) If the child is especially lucky, the sweets will all be gone in the morning. The old tales say this also: “In the wake of the Bidhata Purush come the demons. That is why they leave an oil lamp burning. That is why they place the sacred tulsi leaf under the baby’s pillow for protection. In richer households, they hire a Brahmin to sit in the corridor and recite auspicious prayers all night.” (S.H:15)

Pishi was the widow aunt of Sudha and Anju. She lost her husband at the age of eighteen. According to their custom, she was dressed in austere white, her graying hair cut close to her scalp in the orthodox style. (S.H:16) Anju hated Pishi for being in the back of the hall on feast days as widows were supposed not to participate in it. (S.H:23) Pishi used to tell the stories to Anju and Sudha about the secret, delicious, forbidden tales of their past. Sudha asked curiously Pishi-ma to tell if the sweets disappeared for them on their birth day. Pishi-ma replied negatively that they were not so lucky. When Sudha asked urgently whether she at least heard something, Pishi shook her head in regret and she felt that the Bidhata Purush didn’t come for girl-babies. She said, “I’ve heard the whispers often enough to complete it in my head, for girl-babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die even before they are born.” (S.H:18)

In some of her novels, there was a reference for the items of dishes such as parothas, fried eggplant, and rasogollah balls. In Sister of my Heart, Sudha and Anju in their childhood ate together often from the same plate feeding each other their favourite items: The crunchy brown triangles of parothas, fried eggplant, spongy sweet rasogollah balls. (S.H:25). There is a reference of festival in the novel. Temple festival is famous in India. There was going to be a big kirtan in the neighbourhood temple that afternoon, singers and dholak players who came all the way from Nabadwip, and all the women she knew would go. Pishi considered Kirtans were one of the few pleasures suitable for widows. There is another belief in India; Hindu women will not go near the pickles during their periods. Otherwise, the pickles may rot. She was involved in drying mangoes and she wished to do herself as she did not trust to a maidservant, for everyone
knows: “if the slices are touched by a woman who hasn’t bathed, or has lain with a man that day, or is menstruating, they will turn furry with fungus.” (S.H:32).

There was a reference in the novel about the place ‘kalighat’ and the Kali temple where Sudha’s parents eloped and married: At dawn her mother slipped away from her parent’s home and Sudha’s father took her to the Kali temple. There a priest gestures at them to exchange garlands for ‘kalighat is popular with lovers who have eloped’ (S.H:37) and thus her parents were married. According to the culture, the married women wear vermillion at the forehead: her mother also allowed herself a tiny smile as her husband rubbed vermillion into the parting of her hair, ‘the good luck sindur that proclaims to the world that she is a married woman, with a new life ahead of her.’ (S.H:37)

In India, people have the faith in horoscope which is very obvious when Pishi confirmed to Nalini that Anju was born under the sign of the bull and believed the sign which influences the person never to think what to speak and what not to speak before the words tumble from her mouth. (S.H:68) And it is the usual admonition of the mother to insist the children to follow the prestige of the family. In this novel also Gowri Ma expected Anju to be polite and said: “The last promise I made to your father was that if anything happened to him I would bring you up the way he wanted. The way a daughter of the chatterjee family should be you know that.” (S.H:68)

The families that kept the ancient traditions, girls were not allowed to meet men until the moment of auspicious seeing, shubho drishti, when the bride and groom gave themselves to each other with their eyes. The author said: “It is said in the old tale when a man and woman exchange looks the way we did, their spirits mingle. Their gaze is a rope of gold binding each to the other, even if they never meet again. They carry a little of the other with them always. They can never forget and they can never be wholly happy again” (S.H:75)

During the festival and the celebration at home, various dishes are prepared and guests are invited for the party. At chatterjee family also, a celebration was going on for their successful school education. All the guests arrived on time, laden with gifts and good wishes. They claimed that the cauliflower korma was incomparable, and the
rasogollas were as soft as clouds. (S.H:99) They admired Anju and Sudha profusely when they walked in wearing the matching pink Benarasi saris that mother had bought them for the occasion.

It is the belief of some persons and Sudha had also known the old stories: “When someone is very ill, spirits who were close to her in life come down to earth to take her back with them.” (S.H:104) Gouri Ma was very ill, Sudha felt there were flapping sounds at the window and doubted whether the bird was seeking shelter or it was something else. She thought for Gouri Ma that it would be her husband, her uncle Bijoy, the gentle, trusting man who came to a premature, watery end.

When the date of marriage is fixed at home, the brides are given a special care by the parents. At chatterjee family also, the bridal preparations for Sudha and Anju were in full swing. As Gowri Ma’s health was affected, Nalini created an entire regimen for them. Each morning they started by eating almonds which had been soaked overnight in milk. The aunt had declared, ‘it will cool our systems, calm our minds, and improve both our dispositions and our complexions.’ Then they must apply turmeric paste to their faces for more complexion improvement and keep the pungent, itchy mask on for half an hour while Ramur Ma rubbed warm coconut oil into their hair.

Pishi, the aunt of the sisters, believed: “Long, well-oiled, obedient hair symbolizes virtue in women.” (S.H:108) Her aunt had hired a middle aged Brahmin woman demonstrator to elaborate such as gopalbhog and pati-shapta which the preparations Anju would never by able to duplicate. A Brahmin lady also gave them lessons in the complex laws of orthodox Hindu cuisine: milk and meat products must not be mixed: Non-vegetarian items must be cooked in separate vessels; the left hand must never be used when serving food. Finally, the seamstress came to teach Sudha sewing. (S.H:109)

Ashok and Sudha liked to get marry. As Sudha’s marriage was already arranged with another man at home, she was unable to stop it. So, Ashok told her to elope with him and he instructed her to meet him at the Kalighat temple; telling her mother a lie to get permission that she had promised the goddess to pay her a visit, alone, before her
wedding. Sudha presents a clear description about temple in India at the day time and decided to come at the early morning when a few people would be there. She said:

Whenever I’ve been to the Kalighat temple before this, it has been a cacophony of human and animal clamour priests yelling and shoving at confused temple-goers who mill around like sheep, vendors calling out their wares, lost children wailing crippled beggars crying for alms, goats bleating as they are dragged to sacrifice. So it seems eerily quiet this dawn, only the sweepers washing the steps of the temple, and the first flower sellers setting up garlands of bright orange marigolds and jasmines white as new cooked rice. (S.H:125)

The superstitious belief of the people on falling star is revealed in the novel. According to it, those who wish anything when they see the falling star, the desire will be fulfilled; “a ball of flaming gas hurtling to its doom can, if you believe strongly enough, give your heart’s desire, the death of a star, the birth of a new joy in your life.” (S; H: 128) Sudha was sleepy too. But she wished to stay awake to look for falling stars. She said to herself: “I need two of them, just at midnight, because I must make two wishes, One for myself and one for Anju, because today a promising proposal has arrived for her from a reputable Calcutta family, the Majumdars, whose only son works in America.” (S.H:128)

Indians have so much superstitious belief that gems have influencing power. In this novel also Pishi felt that the ruby had brought them nothing but had luck ever since the day it appeared in the house and wished to get rid of it. So she would sell it and use the money for wedding expenses. (S.H:151) but Aunt Nalini interrupted excitedly to keep the ruby and argued that the ruby is just a stone which can not bring bad luck. She alerted them that the jewelers might cheat the ladies. Anju could understand her desire to keep the ruby badly: Because, her aunt had so much faith on ‘amulets and sooth-Sayers and weekly pujas to keep the planet Shani from casting his evil eye on us to turn so pragmatic all of a sudden.’ (S.H:152)
At the day of wedding ceremony, the family members of Bijoy were busy in getting ready for the marriage. Chitra Banerjee describes about the situation in such a way that the rituals of a hindu family at the day of marriage can be visualized:

It is the day before the weddings of Sudha and Anju […] Hordes of men were at work stringing up lights and settings up an enormous tent on the lawn. In the courtyard behind the kitchen, hired cooks bustled around huge clay ununs, constructed for the occasion, where curries and dhals were bubbling. The air was pungent with the aroma of mustard fish and tomato chutney, for many of their out-of-town relatives had already arrived and must be fed. (S.H:154)

The rituals that Indian observes at the wedding ceremony have the traditional value. The author further tells about rituals from the point of view of bride Anju. It was horribly hot in the wedding tent. Anju was suffocating under the thick weight of incense and the wail of conch-shells and the jabbering of wedding guests. The heavy gold and red Benarasi she was wearing was not helping either. She was standing right in front of Sunil, but she could see his face because the women were holding up a silk sheet between them. They would lower it, only after the priest finished the mantra he was reciting to bring them good luck. It was a thousand-year-old mantra from the Vedas and defines luck as cattle and horses and vessels and the one hundred sons she was supposed to present to sunil. (S.H:164)

At the time of marriage, Sunil held the hands of Anju and repeated the words after the priest: ‘For seven lifetimes will I follow you to the ends of the earth.’ (S.H:166) The ceremony also continued for a long time, such as the putting of sindur on the woman’s forehead, the recital of more mantras, the official giving away of the bride, the recital of even more mantras.(S.H:166). Banerjee explained about the beauty of America. After the marriage, Anju went to America with her husband. When they were sitting at the edge of Rabindra Sarobar, Sunil described America to her; it seemed almost as amazing as the fairy kingdoms of Pishi’s tales. He said excitedly, ‘You can be anything in America, you can be what you want’ (S.H:179)
The culture of giving respects to the elders by touching the feet of them and in return the elders blessing them in a traditional way to have a hundred sons are quite common in the orthodox Indian families. A few days after the wedding, Sudha’s mother in law called her to her room and she told her that Sudha must learn to take charge of it. She got astonishment when she gave keys in her hand. Sudha said, ‘‘I will try to do a good job for you, Mother;’’ I said and touched her feet in the traditional gesture. ‘‘May you be the mother of a hundred sons!’’ She responds formally using the traditional words. But her hand rested for a gentle moment on my head.’’ (S.H:188)

The food habit and the varieties of dishes of a place are revealed at the time of giving feast. The mother and the aunt of Sudha gave her treat to Sudha when they heard about the possibility of her pregnancy. She felt motherhood was her final chance at happiness perhaps she believed it would give her back what wifehood had taken away. After the medical test, the possibility of getting children was confirmed. In celebration of the doctor’s verdict, the mothers had prepared a feast of her childhood favourites such as ‘fried brinjals, puffed-up golden luchis, sautéed red spinach, curries of shrimp and chicken and mustard fish, rice pudding with raisins and pistachios.’ (S.H:219)

In Culcutta, the month of Durga Puja, is considered unsuitable for weddings. And all talks will stop for a while. And also, it is the belief on what they say in our holy books that the moment of our death is written by the Bidhata Purush on our foreheads as soon as we are born. (S.H:226) It is the custom of the people to go to a particular goddess Shasti’s shrine in Belapur for fulfilling a particular purpose. In the novel, Sudha’s mother in law took her to the temple for getting the boon of a child to Sudha. She said, “The goddess is very powerful. All kinds of women have had babies after visiting her. I have already contacted the priest. But in order for it to do us any good, we must get there during the auspicious hour, before the sun sets.”(S.H:233)

Mother in law was very happy about Sudha’s pregnancy. She took special care on her expecting for a male child. At mealtimes she was served first even before Ramesh. She was given the best portions: “the coveted fish heads stewed with lentils and sprinkled with lemon, the crisp golden, brown fried brinjals, and the creamy top layer of the rice pudding that I love.”(S.H:246) Sudha’s mother in law asked Pishi about Sudha’s
favourite dishes. She made sure Dinabandhu, the servant to cook at least one of her favorite items every day. At night after dinner, they all sat and watched videos. Her mother in law liked Sudha to watch comedies, or holy stories from The Ramayana. She said that they would have a good effect on her grandson’s personality (S.H:246)

The food- habit of one place reveals the culture and the identity of the place. To invite Sudha, Anju in The Vine of Desire desired to prepare the favourite dishes of Sudha and bought all the favorite eatables of her. The refrigerator was stuffed with dishes: spaghetti and meatballs, potato salad, runa casserole, banana bread, vanilla pudding, apple pie. All the recipes she looked up painstakingly in her Good Housekeeping Cookbook. (V.D:20) In another occasion, Sudha would have a snack waiting, a khichuri made with rice and mungdal, a childhood favorite of them both, with a wedge of fresh lemon on the side. (V.D:54)

The seeds of good qualities are transmitted not only through the genes but also through the stories from myth. Knowing the value of myth, the elder people at home tell stories from myth in which wisdom and custom are embedded with them. In her letter Anju’s mother insisted about it to Anju and also asked her whether the calendar which she gave her was put up in her home. Why she particularly asked about it was that the favourable time is mentioned in it would be helpful to start and postpone the plan according to the lucky hours which is written in for each day by an astrologer and to celebrate the festival:

Calcutta, April 1994

Dear Anju,

[...]Pishi hopes you two are telling stories from our epics to Dayita. These stories, she says, have much old wisdom embedded in them. [...] How else will you pass on our heritage to Dayita,[...] She says you must make special note of the bad-luck hours which she had the astrologer write in for each day,[...]Every month we have a puja done in Kalighat for our Prem, so that his spirit will be at peace.
Where ever a person goes, he is expected to follow his or her own culture. And every country has its own culture to be followed and to be moralized. When Anju was studying at a college in America, she was given an assignment to write. The topic itself highlights the value of culture: “Write an essay examining the effects of culture and heredity upon an individual. Would you say they are more important than character visits in influencing the individual’s behavior?” (V.D:98). The culture of dancing male and female together are quite common in America. Waltz is a kind of dance famous in the country like America. So when the party was going on Lalit asked Sudha whether she had known waltz and told her to join with him. (V.D:136-7)

The elder people in orthodox family in India like to bring the children with cultural background of moral ethics through the stories of epics in which the mythological characters are involved in it. For this reason Pishi asked permission to send such books to Sudha’s little daughter, Dayita for sowing moral in the tender heart of Dayita:

Dearest Sudha,

Please let me know if you would like me to send you a copy of Thakumar Jhuli, or The Children’s Ramayana Picture Book to read to Dayita. I remember how they used to be your favorites.

Pishi. (V.D:141)

The people of India have strong faith in horoscope and astrology. The mentioning of rahukal and Shani in Nalini’s letter confirmed it:

Dear daughter Sudha,

I hope you are observing the rahukal hours listed on that calendar we sent you. Last week when I made my regular trip to my astrologer said that the planet Shani was ascending and it was a time for the Chatterjee women to be careful. (V.D:144)
The calendar which the mothers gave Sudha before leaving was Indian-style, printed on very thin white paper. It also stood to express the culture of the Indians. The months and days were marked in red Bengal lettering. It told them which days were auspicious, and which were bad luck. Little diagrams marked full moons and no moons, and the thin sliver of the eleventh night, which was a time for women without husbands to fast and pray for purification. Handwritten notes on the bottom of each page warned them of the dangerous hours: rahukal, which shifts each day with the movement of the planets, when it was good to lie low. (V.D:149) Sudha read them aloud: “People who begin a journey in the month of Bhadra never come back. A wedding conducted in Aashwin ends in calamity. Books should not be read but only worshipped on Saraswati Puja, the day dedicated to the goddess of learning.” (V.D:150)

When Anju and Sudha were growing up, Aunt Nalini used to tell them ‘joto basi toto kanna’ which mean how much you laugh today, that is how much you will cry tomorrow. (V.D:175) Pishi would have already warned her when we desired something so much, the gods might snatch it away. Even Gouri Ma would have advised to be cautious. (160) Sudha hated that saying and she refused to believe it. She thought that the old sayings had the embedded pessimism.

When Sudha was helping an old man in Myra’s family, Sudha prepared food in such a way that for the lack of ingredients, she managed to compensate with the other ingredients which were available in the kitchen and also found out the different type of preparations between India and America: In India we could have tied each ingredient into a piece of old cloth and steamed it with the rice, letting the flavors soak in. Here, I boil them in a pan, then mash them into balls flavored with salt and olive oil, a little pepper. (V.D:246)

Anju recollected the ceremony of her first birthday. The ceremony reflects the culture of Calcutta: Anju was born a daughter of the Chatterjees of Bhavanipur, and grew up in a marble mansion so old and famous that passersby pointed it out to each other. On her first birthday, her mother invited a hundred Brahmins to come and perform a fire ceremony for blessing. When she was grown up, her marriage was written up in the
social register of the Amrita Bazaar Patrika. But when Anju moved to USA, she was alone in a dim apartment full of broken glass. (V.D:264-265)

The beauty and neatness of the place also states the pride and culture of the place. One Sunday, Lalit wanted to take Sudha up to Grizzly Peak, to see the sunset across the bay. When they reached the place, Lalit pointed out the beauty of the place in such a way that the readers themselves are taken to the place. He explains;

“There’s the campanile at Cal, there’s the Bay Bridge, backed up as usual, there’s Angel Island, where at one time deer and immigrants were quarantined. That’s the ferry to Sausalito, where all the decadent artists live. Did you know that Marin County is the home of the hot tub? Did you know that Coit Tower was built by San Francisco fireman in the shape of firehose nozzle? That’s Alcatraz, from which no prisoners ever escaped alive.” (V.D: 279)

He also said that he would take her and Dayita both to Point Lobos, to see the cormorants on Bird Island and to Ano Nuevo that is where elephant seals come in December to have their babies. He asked her, “Did you know there’s an island out there, a ruined lighthouse that’s been taken over by the sea lions?” (V.D:280)

The superstitious belief of some people on falling star is the usual custom in Calcutta. Sudha asked him whether Lalit had any belief in falling stars. He asked her whether any of the wishes come true. She replied, “One time, just before Anju and I got married, I was so sad to think that we’d be separated, that I wished we could love the same man, like woman did in the Mahabharata, that we could all live together. . . .” (V.D:281) Lalit said that her wish came true. And also, it is narrated in the novel that the old people of Calcutta had the belief that the soul of the dead would come to the dying person. Once the old man had no longer the desire to live and his health also was declining. Sudha prayed that he should not die, because her own life was also involved in his life. (V.D:283-284) She remembered what Pishi used to say, When a person is about to die, the souls of dead people that were close to him come to help him across. She
imagined that the old man’s wife might be there, or even his parents, come to take him home.

In India, people observe so many ceremonies especially for birth and death. It is the special aspect which highlights the culture of our country. In The Vine of Desire, Sunil had come back to Culcutta to do final death ceremony of his father. He had come to the Kali temple and the priest told him to do certain rituals to give peace to the soul of the dead father:

The river [Ganga] is gray with age and weight. It has traveled a long way [...] to this city populated by too many people, all their histories and hopes. Their deaths. For that’s what they bring to the river here, by the Kali temple. Flowers and food offered to the spirits of ancestors who hover, it is believed, on its banks until sent on with prayers. (V.D:324)

Sunil had reluctantly agreed to the ceremony to propitiate the dead, mostly to please his mother. (V.D:325) Then Sunil sat by the river, where the priest had lit a small fire, and repeated mantras to bring peace to the dead. The priest poured black sesame seeds in his palm, sprinkled them with river water. Sunil chanted obediently after the priest. Then they were holding up balls of cooked rice for fourteen generations of ancestors. Even though Sunil doubted whether it was possible to let go of something that had cut such a deep groove into one: The priest is chanting: “Weapons cleave It not, fire burns It not. Water wets It not, wind burns It Not.[...]It is time to pour the ashes into the water. He holds out the copper pot. Ash falls from his hands. Some of it blows into his eyes and makes them eater. He wipes at them. The priest nods with approval at this sign of filial piety. (V.D 327-328)

Chitra Banerjee has not only given feast to the eyes by the beautiful scenic description. But also for the tongue by serving various food items such as pooris, samosas, gulab jamuns, jalebis and so on. When Anand in The Conch Bearer was saved by a stranger, the stranger helped Anand to travel with him and to take the variety of food
that he had brought. The man in front of him, was unwrapping a large cloth filled with all the dishes Anand loved:

There were piles of deep-fried pooris, golden brown and still steaming.
There were the crisp triangles of samosas stuffed with spicy peas and potatoes, and green coriander-leaf chutney to dip them in.[...] There was chicken cooked in yogurt sauce, and the biggest fried prawns Anand had ever seen. [...] rice pudding studded with raisins and pistachios, which he hadn’t eaten in ages and ages. His mouth watered. (C.B:67)

Nisha, a girl who was the friend of Anand, was pleading Abhayadatta to take her with him that she could not bear to go back to living under the soft-drink stall in which she worked. Abhayadatta sighed and accepted her. He said, ‘An even number is better than an odd one when starting on a journey like ours. But sometimes chance is a better guide than all the maps. I’ll take you.’(C.B:83): the superstitious belief on odd number and even number is still quite common in India.

While reading a work of art, the culture of a place is revealed in the form of food, clothing, and customs and so on. As stated, man carries the destiny of his own; people carry their culture wherever he goes. It is clearly expressed in Chitra Banerjee’s novels which give importance for culture in the form of food. Rakhi in Queen of Dreams says, “At home we rarely ate anything but Indian; that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture.” (QD 7)When Rakhi asked for ravioli, her mother started preparing it to fulfill the desire of her daughter. The author enjoys in giving a detailed description about the preparation of the foods in such a way that it creates appetite to the reader. The following are the some of the evidence for it:

Belle’s careful with the muffins she’s setting out on their tray: Chocolate chip, blueberry, bran, carrot, and almond. [...] Next to them are lemon glazed Danishes, and then a plate of the crumbly sugar-and-cinnamon cookies. (24) [...] Sonny brings back care packages filled with his favorite
gourmet dishes – palak paneer, tandoori chicken pooris – items that take hours of preparation time. (29)

Mr. Gupta listed the items on a sheet of paper: pakora, singara, sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana. The daughter of him wondered whether her father could really transform himself into a chef extraordinaire and turned out those items from the mundaneness of flour and sugar syrup, chili, eggplants, peanut oil and he was heroic enough to take on such a metamorphosis. (165-166)

Mr. Gupta narrated his past about how he became an excellent in cooking. When the family met financial crisis, he worked in a Keshto shop. Keshto was kind to him. He taught him his special recipes, sharing with him little secrets that gave them their special flavor. He learned to make rasogollas and pakoramix and so on. He continued: In those days Keshto taught me the most difficult dishes he knew. We made rabri, where milk is boiled and thickened, cooled and poured, layer by slow layer. We made rasogolla payesh, which is two sweets in one, the fluffy white balls floating in a thick, delicious cream. We made dhakai parota, where the dough is cut and rolled in such a way that it forms thin, flaky layers that melt on the tongue. (170-171)

What he learnt from Keshto was very helpful to Mr. Gupta to extend his support to his daughter Rakhi to run a hotel, Kurma House. People started to visit their kurma house to taste the delicious items in the shop. The shop was full of the smell of singaras. Her father used to prepare the cauliflower potato stuffing which bought many customers to their hotel. (Q D 217)

Chitra Banerjee in ‘Palace of Illusion’ describes about the life of Kuru dynasty and the Kurukshetra war as the novel is based on the epic The Mahabharat. The novel also reflects the culture and custom of Dvapar Yunga or the Third Age of Man (which many scholars date between 6000 BCE and 5000 BCE). The novelist also explained the minute details as that of the epic. In the novel, it is described about the royal family which would go in a procession on that particular night each year: the men in front, the women behind to a Shiva temple and offered their prayers. (P.I:9)
The caste system of the ancient period is revealed through the novel. The tutor asked about the origin of the four castes, and then he explained that the Supreme Being manifested Himself, the brahmin was born from his head, the kshatriya from his arm, the vaishya from his thigh, and the sudra from his foot.”(P.I:22). From the epic, it is clear that women’s education was refused in the ancient period: Draupati begged her father King Drupad for educating herself. He had talked at the thought of her studying with her brother: “A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal!” (P.I:23) The desire of getting education was expressed:

A kshatriya woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they get the opportunity to fulfill a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield.”(P.I:25&26)

Draupadi would learn (as her education was stopped) by observing the activities of Dhri, spying him and overhearing the chanting prayers to the sun: O great son of kashyap, colored like the hibiscus, I bow to you. And then, from the Manu Samhita, He who has not conquered himself, how will that king conquer enemies? (P.I:27) She learned also the differences between righteous and unrighteous war, and when to use each. There were the lessons she most envied him, the lessons that conferred power. They were the ones she needed to know if she was to change history and so she cajoled Dhri to share with her about rules of the war: (P.I:27&28)

"In righteous war, you fight only with men that are your equal in rank. You don't attack your enemies at night, or when they're re-treating or unarmed. You don't strike them on the back or below the navel. You use your celestial astras only on warriors who themselves have such weapons.”(P.I:28)

She wanted to know about the unrighteous war. Dhri admonished that she did not need to know about that. Her brother told he had told her too much already and wondered why
she wanted all that information. One day Dhruv asked Dhriti to tell her about the celestial astras. She didn't think he would agree, but he shrugged. He said,

“They’re weapons that must be invoked with special chants. They come from the gods and return to them after being used. The most powerful ones can be used only once in a warrior's lifetime.”[...] They say that some, like the Brahmastra, wrongly used, can destroy all of creation. (P.I:28)

All the subjects related to administration were taught only to her brother Dhriti. Dhriti herself taught Draupadi the rules of comportment—how to walk, talk, and sit in the company of men; how to do the same when only women were present; how to show respect to queens who were more important; how to subtly snub lesser princesses; how to intimidate the other wives of her husbands. (P.I:30) The epic The Mahabarat, helps us to understand about the predicament of women in the ancient period.

The sorceress had also taught Draupadi, the other unqueenly skills. She taught her portions to cure illness and potions to cause them. She taught her to be unafraid of speaking out, and to be brave enough for silence. She taught her when to lie and when to speak the truth. (P.I:62) Draupadi understood that she was preparing herself for the different situations that would appear in her life.

The swayamvara system was in vogue among the royal people. Dhriti informed Draupadi was to have a swayamvar. Eligible rulers from every kingdom in Bharat would be invited to Panchaal. From among them, her father had announced, she would choose the man she was to marry. (P.I:54) Krishna told Dhiradhumna to tell her about the test. Before the wedding, Dhriti announced about a test of skill. The king who won it would be the one she had to garland. (P.I:55) He explained,

“They [the competitors] can’t look directly at the target but only at its reflection in a pool of whirling water. They must shoot five arrows through a tiny hole in a shield to hit the target. Nor can they use their own weapons. “They must use the Kindhara, the heaviest bow in existence.”(P.I:56)
Gandhari was a typical wife who was much devoted to her husband. Dhai Ma said about the story of Gandhari: When she heard that she was to marry the blind Dhritarashtra, she tied a cloth over her eyes, declaring she didn’t want to enjoy the pleasures her husband had been deprived of. She never removed it since. (P.I:75) Draupadi and Dhai Ma agreed that Gandhari's sacrifice wasn't particularly intelligent. (P.I:75&76) Draupadi said, “If my husband couldn't see, I'd make doubly sure to keep my own eyes open, so that I could report everything that was going on to him. (P.I:76) The revolutionary concept of Draupadi’s view itself an example for the demythification in the epic according to the writer point of view.

The author compared Draupathi to Savithri, Sita and Davyani. Draupathi had also been subjected to the lives of Savitri, who heroically saved her husband from the clutches of Lord Death; Sita was eternally faithful to her husband, even when abducted by a demon king; and Devyani, who, in spite of her father's warnings, insisted on falling in love with the wrong man and was left brokenhearted.

There was the caste system in the ancient time also. Across the hall, spectators were grouped according to caste. The vaishya sector was marked by a blue banner painted with a merchant ship. The sudra banner depicted farmers harvesting wheat. The brahmins had the best seats, up front, with fat, tassled blisters to lean on. Their banner, a priest making a fire offering, was made of white silk. (P.I:92). The women of virtuous quality and chastity get power. Dhai Ma said, how a god pleased by Gandhari’s devotion to her husband, had granted her a boon: If she ever took off her blindfold and looked at someone, she could heal him – or burn him to cinders. (P.I:129) Later she told Duryodhan to come naked to give her power. But he came tied himself with a loin cloth and got power. When Bheem came to know the hint of Krishna, he defeated Duryodhan by hitting him under the navel.

It was said in the olden days that the boundaries of afterlife are even more complicated than the rules on earth. Chitra Banerjee describes in The Palace of Illusion that depending on their deeds, the dead can be dispatched to many different abodes. Fortunate brahmins are sent to Brahmaloka, where they can learn divine wisdom directly from the Creator. The best among kshatriyas go to Indraloka, filled as it is with pleasures
both artistic and hedonistic. Lesser warriors must be content with the courts of the god of death, or the sun and moon deities. For evildoers, there are one hundred and thirty-six levels of hell, each corresponding to a particular sin, and each with its own set of tortures, such as tongue-tearing, being boiled in oil, or being devoured by ravenous birds, all of which our scriptures describe with great relish. (P.I:154)

There are some evidences for the principle of performing Rajasuya sacrifice. When Narad visited the palace of illusion said to the Pandavas that their ancestors could not enter Indra’s court unless they performed Rajasuya sacrifice. When they asked him how to perform, he explained to them, “It's too dangerous! First you must make all the kings of Bharat pay you tribute. And if they don't, you must battle and defeat them. And then you must hold a huge fire ceremony that they all have to attend.” (P.I:157)

When Draupati came to know about karna’s arrival from Anga to Hastinapur, she felt excited and she ordered for a best dress from Indraprasta. Then she finally felt what she wanted was sinful. The culture prevented her even if it was only an admiring glance from Karna. She thought: Words from our scriptures came into my mind: a wife who holds in her heart desireful thoughts of a man who is not her husband is as unfaithful as a woman who sleeps with such a man. […] I picked instead a plain white a delicate border of red and gold. (P.I:185). Draupadi informed Dhai Ma that she would wear a simple set of pearls and dress her hair only with jasmine. She clicked her tongue in disapproval that only old women wore white, but finally she complied. (P.I:185 & 186)

Draupadi was not surprised when Yudhisthir told her what he had asked for was that the victory against the six inner enemies that plague us all: lust, anger, greed, ignorance, arrogance, and envy. (P.I:221) The yaksha once asked several questions to test the pandavas and among them yuthisthir had patient enough to answer patiently and he was rewarded:

What is more numerous than the grass?

The thoughts that rise in the mind of man.

Who is truly wealthy?
That man to whom the agreeable and disagreeable, wealth and woe, past and future, are the same.

*What is the most wondrous thing on earth?*

Each day countless humans enter the Temple of Death, yet the ones left behind continue to live as though they were immortal. (P.I:221)

People in India had belief in dreams that they would foretell future. For her part, Draupadi dreamed of beasts: Riderless horses screamed their terror through her nights, the whites of their eyes gleaming in firelight, elephants fell to their knees, trumpeting bloodily. (P.I:239) She should have tried to understand that the dreams foretold and she discussed them with her husbands and cautioned them accordingly. But she didn’t want to heed anything that might keep her from the revenge against Gauravas. (P.I:240)

There were superstitious beliefs in the ancient period also: Draupadi lifted her face to the sky and sent forth a prayer that the Pandavas would achieve even greater fame than they imagined. She had hardly finished when a star detached itself from the black sky and fell. Her heart expanded at this good luck sign and thought that the gods had answered her. (P.I:251)

In another occasion, Draupadi had a nightmare. So she awoke in the woman’s tent, screaming and thrashing. Failing to calm her, her attendants ran to fetch the other queens. Kunti declared she was possessed by an evil spirit and called for red chilies, which she burned over a flame, making them all cough. (P.I:305) but Draupadi’s dream came true that she could see the burnt dead bodies of her children and Dhri.

Even though Pandavas got victory in the Kurukshetra war, the bereaved women lamented for the death of their own husbands, brothers and sons. When they realized that they would not be able to view the bodies of their loved one, they grew frenzied with despair. They committed suicide in different ways: Others tried to kill themselves with the weapons that were strewn about the field. Still others threw themselves onto the pyres stacked with bodies. Their tormented cries as their white garments charred to black
were more unbearable than all the death screams I’d heard in battle. My own despair receded as I watched their agony. (P.I:311)

Yudhisthir assured them they had nothing to fear. He vowed that they would suffer none of the evils that befell the women of a defeated city. He offered them food and water, and a safe place to rest while the dead were taken care of. The bereaved women wailed and cursed, their grief replaced by rage. They didn't want his charity. They asked him to murder them and thus spared them the bleakness of widowhood and its endless humiliations. They cried if he was too cowardly to kill them, at least he should allow them to die an honorable death on their husbands' pyres. (PI 312) They broke away from the group and rushed at the pyres. Others followed them.

The widows wore dress which meant for them and stopped wearing jewels. Draupadi could see on Yudhishtir’s face a further concern: the tragic death of so many women at the very beginning of his reign would be a stain on his kingship, a devastating karma for him to bear. (P.I:312) some women joined with them. Only Bhanumati declined to join them. She returned to her father’s kingdom. (P.I:323) On the day she left, as Bhanumati climbed into her chariot dressed in white, her forehead bare, her arms stripped of the jingling bangles she had once so delighted in. (P.I:323 & 324). The wives are very faithful and loving to their husbands. For that reason, they did not like to live after the death of them. Krishna's wives threw themselves at Arjun’s feet crying and said to bring Krishna back. They could not live without him. Krishna’s body was placed on the pyre by Arjun. When the flames rose, many of his wives threw themselves into the fire. (P.I:339)

Myth has existed in every society. Indeed, it would seem to be a basic constituent of human culture. Because the variety is so great, it is difficult to generalize about the native of myth. In western cultures there are a number of literary or narrative genres that scholars have related in different ways to myths. Example, are fables, fairy tales, folktales, sagas, epics, legends and etiologic tales. The use of myths and legends is the most outstanding part of the technique of narration in Chitra’s novels. It is through these subtle allusions, myths and legends that the narrative of Divakaruni’s fiction acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of Indian women. Palace of Illusions is
reinterpreted the story of Indian epic. In ancient days, men in the world treated women as slaves and mute sufferers. They should not rebel against injustice and raise questions for their equal rights. Divakaruni breaks the deification women as mute beings. She deconstructs myth and makes Draupadi to narrate her life with Pandavas proving that woman has voice by giving chance to let out her feelings.

This chapter further has discussed the importance of maintaining culture for diasporic Indians: Culture symbolizes both group identity and survival for Indian immigrants. The high priority placed on transplanting their cultural traditions to foreign soil is also connected to a deeply rooted belief in the indestructibility of Indian culture—even removed from the home country in which it arose, it must and will have a life of its own. Chitra’s novels prove that Indians have made major efforts to celebrate their cultural traditions in the United States. The integration of the bicultural identity is a challenging, yet rewarding task for both ethnic parents and their assimilating children. Her novels portray the possibility for establishing a bicultural identity. Divakaruni’s approach to ethnic identity is contingent within the view of south Asian Diaspora that believes in the necessity of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience. As is well known, language and culture are inevitably connected. One cannot exist in the absence of the other.

Damodar says: “Primitive elements survive in all religious beliefs shared by any considerable number of people. Some Indian myths and rituals still survive to this day.” (1&12) This is not too difficult in a country where contemporary society is composed of elements that preserve the indelible marks of almost every historical stage. The neglect of such analysis leads to a ridiculous distortion of Indian history and to a misunderstanding of Indian culture. The novels of Chitra Banerjee show her the reference of Indian myths and rituals.

When Rakhi’s Chai house was about to be closed by the new arrival of Java café, her husband and her father gave her support to restart her shop. Her father could bring the customers by different ways of preparing the dishes and boasted that the laddus and puddings that he prepared was so primitive recipe of The Ramayana: “The rice pudding, her father said, was one of the oldest desserts of India, mentioned even in The
Ramayana. It was what the gods sent to King Dasharath’s barren queens to make them fruitful. He pointed of the laddus and informed Sonny’s friends that they were made from the same recipe that Duryodhan’s cook used in the Mahabharat to lure and poison his cousin Bheem. (Q.D:189)

French gourmand Jean Anthelme Brilliat In his masterpiece ‘The Psychology of Taste’ (1825) says: “Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell who you are.” There is a lot of truth in it. We can understand food and identity in many different ways. Food is understood as a consumer material object, it represents a cultural expression that takes part in the process of objectification by which we create ourselves, our identities, social affiliations and practices lived in everyday life. Turning to the contemporary culinary practices and their representations is also an interesting way to enhance our understanding of consumer culture. Chitra Banerjee has given undue importance to the various dishes and the recipe of some of the food items which represents a cultural expression, create identity and help the immigrants to feel at home. The elements of magic realism, myth and culture are linked together to present surprise, novelty and new technique to Chitra Banerjee’s novels which also help to bring out other themes such as nostalgia, identity crisis, demythification and remythification.

Diasporic women writers portrayed the cultural dilemmas, the generational differences, and transformation of their identities during displacement. These writers are deeply attached to their centrifugal homeland and they are caught physically between two worlds. Their experiences as living in-between condition is very painful and they stand bewildered and confused. In their aim at self-definition and the expression of their expatriate experiences, women from 1970s onwards chose literature to pour out their passions. Diaspora women writers sought to find words and forms to fit their experiences and have chosen narrative strategies like the auto-biography, the novels and the short stories to do so. The Indian diasporic women writers such as Bharati Mukherji, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and kiran Desai have unveiled the complexities of discrimination, assimilation, social and demographic change, which not only affected the society itself but the lives of the various ethnic groups and the immigrants. The cultural
barriers, identity crisis, racism, and violence faced by the immigrant expressed in all the Diasporic literature.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is another woman writer of first generation who brilliantly portrays gender in its vivid. Her female protagonists are memorable and real representations of diasporic Indian women. Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* is a true representative of diasporic identity. She was born in India, becomes trained in spices and called *The Mistress of Spices* finally lives as an individual in America. She comes across many characters representing vivid identities of diasporic life like scattered identity, marginalized, rebellious, docile, traditional and modern. Chitra banerjee represented younger women, first and second generations who find their true identity in American land, is an example of complexities of transformation.

The Indian Diaspora plays a significant role in reflecting the complexities of diasporic experiences in literature. It aims to examine the displacement and the nostalgia for their homeland and alienation caused by displacement or dislocation as well as conflict between generations and cultural identity. Diasporic women writers tend to portray the cultural dilemmas, the generational differences, and transformation of their identities during displacement. The spirit of exile and alienation enriches the diasporic writers to seek rehabilitation in their writings and establish a permanent place in English Diasporic literature. Divakaruni is herself the embodiment of the themes prevalent in her writings, or, as she states on her personal website, those of “women, immigration, the South Asian experience, history, myth, magic and celebrating diversity.” Her literature allows for a variety of readings such as Feminism, Transnationalism and Multiculturalism, with notions of exile, postcolonialism, and hybridity mixing with myth and magic situated at the very core of Divakaruni’s numerous narratives that would not exist without these dimensions.

Divakaruni’s literature allows for a variety of readings such as Feminism, Transnationalism and Multiculturalism, with notions of exile, postcolonialism, and hybridity mixing with myth and magic situated at the very core of Divakaruni’s numerous narratives that would not exist without these dimensions. While most of Western researchers of Divakaruni’s works tend to privilege the new global dimensions
in Divakaruni’s work such as they appeal to contemporary criticism, the spiritual aspects
based on the writer’s Indian heritage continue to be somewhat obfuscated, foreign, hard
to embrace and difficult to grasp, especially when dealt with in academic settings.

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