

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MARITAL RAPE IN AN ALIEN LAND:  
DEPICTION OF LALITA AS 'NEW WOMAN' IN CHITRA BANERJEE  
DIVAKARUNI'S 'THE MISTRESS OF SPICES'**

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**Abstract:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is known for her novels on the immigration experience, predominantly that of South Asian women. Having had her roots in India and the resurgence of her life and career in Sunnyvale, California, since 1989, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writing mission was to explore the problems faced by women and suggest feasible remedies to overcome them. Her literary landscape explored the sad spectacle of the deprived, dispossessed women and dysfunctional families, while the real world beckoned her to deal with real-time issues involving women. She worked with Afghani women refugees and women in shelters for battered women. She is the founder-member, and president of MAITRI, an organization in the San Francisco area to help South Asian women in abusive situations. Her essay, "My Work with MAITRI," reflects that her work in alleviating the sufferings of abused women has been both valuable and harrowing. The lives of many women she met through this organization have touched her very deeply.

**Keywords:** dysfunctional, phenomenon, detachment, immigrant, humiliation

Chitra Banerjee was also associated with an organization in Houston for Asians against Domestic Abuse. Her concern for these women grew when she realized there was no average shelter for immigrant women in distress, a place where people would understand their cultural needs and problems in the United States. The experience she gathered from the counselling sessions for Asian women opened up to her unimaginable crises that women face day in and day out.

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the Indian American writer's emergence on the world literary landscape in the 1990s, established her reputation as a prolific and discerning writer. Her novels and short stories are replete with the challenges faced by women drawn from the tapestry of Diaspora and feministic sensibility. A few such challenges that devastated the life and mind of women are the issues of domestic violence and marital rape. *The Mistress of Spices* is a novel that has adopted a more complex strategy for portraying the struggles of women forayed by domestic aggression and scars.

For decades, feminist activists have been fighting to support women victims of domestic violence or attacks to see a society free of such violence. If violence, in its barest implications, means the pattern of abusive behavior used by an individual to maintain coercive control over another, its routine expression may be observed in 'verbal abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.' Lalita, in *The Mistress of Spices*, has experienced most of the above in its extreme doses.

Chitra Banerjee's debut novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), is distinct in the sense that it blends prose and poetry, successfully employing magic realist techniques. Its female protagonist, Tilo (short for Tilottama), is the "mistress of spices." Her past life is characterized by fantasy and magic. Her life in the present is related to her service as a mistress in a spice store in the crooked corner of Esperanza where Oakland buses stop. The store's inner room is designed with its sacred and secret shelves. During her interactions with the customers, she raised questions about their problems. She not only supplies the ingredients for curries and kormas but also helps her customers gain a more precious commodity- their heart's desire. The free advice that she gives to the local Indian expatriate community has significant implications. Each individual who comes to the shop is prescribed different spices. The women characters like Daksha and Lalita, children, and men characters like Jagjit, Haroun, Mohan, and Raven seek occult help from Tilo. The consultation with her customers gives Tilo glimpses of an abused wife, a naïve cabbie, and a sullen – clinging to dignity, all lacking balance. She helps Lalita, an immigrant woman from India whose married life is in the doldrums. Her life is no different from many married Indian women who are deprived of their dignity (as a woman) in America.

Lalita, Ahuja's wife, experienced dispossession in her life. She has no interest in getting hitched. She had not seen her husband until three days prior to the wedding. He is an American. He looks nothing like the picture that was presented to her. Surprisingly, Lalita's parents support Ahuja's quick marriage to their daughter rather than voice their opposition. Although she dislikes him, she cannot communicate her feelings to her parents. She marries a violent alcoholic who abuses her, leaving the stable and happy life at her father's house: "The worst are the kisses after it is over, kisses that leave their wetness on her mouth, and his slaked repentant voice in her ear."

An essential pillar of society is the institution of marriage. The cornerstone of a family is marriage, which is meant to be the holy union of two souls and bodies. Marriage is a cultural practice sanctioning a more or less permanent union between partners and imparting legitimacy on their kids;

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according to sociologists: "No doubt marriage can afford certain material and sexual conveniences: it frees the individual from loneliness, it establishes him securely in space and time by giving him a home and children; it is a definitive fulfillment of his existence" (De Beauvoir 421). Amongst Hindus, the wife is known as 'Ardhangini' or 'Sahadharmini' – terms which emphasize her equality and oneness with the husband; marriage emphasizes mutuality and connection. However, regrettably, Lalita's hopes are dashed on the wedding day itself. The estrangement, which started in India, has never ended.

Lalita, a charming but depressed individual, discovered that her arranged union with her American-based, considerably older, traditional, and domineering Indian husband did not work out. When she is frustrated with her male counterpart, she turns to Tilo. Veena Selvam, in "Mistress and Sisters: Creating a Female Universe" in *The Commonwealth Review*, remarks, "When once she [Tilo] lands in America in her spice store, she can empathize with her women customers better than with her male customers" (15).

Having been disillusioned with her married life, Lalita wants to take up her tailoring skills again to make both ends meet. This small step forward may help her to be financially independent and lead the hassle-free life that she once enjoyed as an unmarried daughter of her parents. This may also free her from her husband's domination. He is "the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence he represents it in the view of society" (De Beauvoir 418). She is passionate about her needlework, but she is not allowed to do so by her husband. Instead he expects her to obey in bed whenever he is in need: "In bed especially I could not forget those nights in India. Even when he tried to be gentle I was stiff and not willing. Then he would lose patience and shout" (103). However, she could not neglect the voice from her inside heart, which lays out the condition that outlines womanly duties for her.

She is a human being trapped between her husband's cold indifference and the brutality of his family. Her very existence is painted in darkness, and her privacy, desires, dreams, and future are cruelly taken from her. "What do I have to live for? Once, more than anything in the world, I wanted a baby. But is this any kind of home to bring a new life into?" (103). Lalita is like a caged bird who flutters to soar into the sky and live a free life but is incarcerated within the four walls of a house.

Family is an integral part of any society in the world. It is the family members who support each other during times of distress and disappointment. Even in a new land, an individual can have a blissful life if the family is with him. Lalita, in *The Mistress of Spices*, longs for a child and tries to form an emotional bond with her husband. As an immigrant woman she does not have anybody to share her feelings, so she seeks Tilo's help when she goes to her spice shop.

In Ahuja's case, his marriage to Lalita is centered around power. One that is built on the love of two equal beings, as opposed to one that serves the needs of only one of the two: "Recently, the rules. No going out. No talking on the phone. Every penny I spend to be accounted for. He should read my letters before he mails them" (103). She is therefore exposed to unrelenting confinement, which includes being forbidden from going to work, and Ahuja's jealousy rages when his nagging

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phone calls go unanswered periodically, which leads to physical and sexual violence.: "And the calls. All day. Sometimes every twenty minutes. To check on what I am doing. To make sure I am there. I pick up the phone and say hello, and there is his breathing on the end of the line" (103). Lalita dislikes the concept of love and rejects the notion that love can exist between a man and a woman. She begins to despise the man-woman relationship, which is founded more on need and attraction rather than on love: "The wife is ashamed to find herself given to someone who is exercising a right over her" (De Beauvoir 432).

Feminism opens the door to the idea of womanhood. In a patriarchal society, a woman's conventional function is always understood by a man. Despite not having a personal identity, she is revered in her roles as a mother to a father, a sister to a brother, a wife to a husband, and a daughter to a father. It is significant to note the opinions of Susan S. Wadley expressed in "Women and the Hindu Tradition" in this context:

Classical Hindu laws focus almost exclusively on women as wives. Role models and norms for mothers, daughters, and sisters are more apt to appear in folklore and vernacular traditions. Furthermore, most written traditions emphasize women's behavior in relationship to men: wife/husband, mother/son, daughter/father, sister/brother. Role models for female behavior concerning other females (mother/daughter, sister/sister, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law, husband's sister/wife) are common themes in folklore and oral traditions but not in the more authoritative religious literature. (117)

With more incessant beating, Lalita's sad situation gets worse. Her spouse humiliates her and sexually assaults her. This pathetic plight of Lalita is exposed to Tilo when she shows her urgency in getting back home, or it may incur the wrath of her husband: "I need to get home. He must have called one dozen times. When he comes home tonight—" (104). Whenever Lalita is reluctant to the physical union, Ahuja's patience can be seen only for a couple of days. When she refuses the third time, he becomes violent. Her attempts to claw and bite receive a slap on the head: "Not hard, but the shock of it makes her go limp so he can do what he wants" (101). He does not even appear to care about her. It becomes customary to insult and physically abuse her regularly: "fear rises from her, shimmering, like heat from a cracked summer pavement. Fear and hate and disappointment" (104). She seeks advice from Tilo regarding her problem and understands that "No man, husband or not, has the right to beat you [me], to force you [me] . . . I tell myself, I deserve dignity, I deserve happiness" (105-272).

Tilo assists everyone who enters her store, regardless of their sexual orientation; she can identify with ladies like Lalita, Daksha, and Geeta's suffering as her own. She describes how she perceives the women using the traditional feminine metaphor of spices. Even though she reaches out to men like Raven, Haroun, Geeta's grandfather, and Jagjit, she cannot connect with them on the same level. When Tilo talks about the lessons she has learned on the island, she says: "Most of all, we learned to feel without words the sorrows of our sisters, and without words to console them. In

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this way, our lives were not so different from those of the girls we had left behind in our home villages” (52).

Tilo frees Mrs. Ahuja from the oppressive shackles that have held her back, enabling her to transform into her identity, Lalita. The inference is that women have been learning to bond with one another while performing household chores for generations when she claims that their life on the island of spices was similar to that of rural girls. Through performing routine daily tasks like sweeping and sewing, they learn the value of forming bonds with other women. As a result, female bonding has always been indirect, and Tilo learns in the same manner as women everywhere. Any interpersonal relationship's success is based on how strong and independent each partner is. Chitra Banerjee has captured the inner conflict that a woman has as she struggles to balance her wisdom with what is being forced upon her by her environment. Lalita realizes that her own home and family are not her true haven. Although the family is the primary matrix and the center of a woman's existence, many of the women in Chitra Banerjee's novels appear to be able to accept it. She exhibits her skill at gently portraying the agony of women who are restrained by bad relationships and rigid social conventions. She is sympathetic and solid and even employs exquisitely moving imagery.

Pursuing an affluent lifestyle in America is frequently called the "American Dream." The marginalized people in the eastern countries mistakenly believe that if they travel to America and achieve financial success, they will gain respect. To make a living and survive, immigrants take up common professions in the new land of their dreams: "Ahuja is a watchman at the docks" (14). After Lalita leaves her husband's house, the fear of her future looms, but the Indian women in the organization where she seeks help are compassionate. Lalita strongly believes that "they can help me [her] set up a small tailoring business" (272).

For some older immigrants, assimilating into American society was necessary to increase their chances of surviving in a foreign country. Others intentionally adopted the American way because they desired to immigrate to this land of liberty and bring up their children to be ideal citizens from the start. Assimilation is one of the essential changes that occur as soon as a person enters a Western or foreign culture. In his article named "Crisis of Unbelonging in Some Expatriate Stories from the Canadian and Indian Context" in *Writers of Indian Diaspora*, P.A. Abraham says,

Caught between two worlds, the expatriate negotiates a new space, caught between two cultures, and after languages, the expatriate writer negotiates a new literary space. Therefore, an anxious sense of dislocation is characteristic of expatriate writings. The shifting designation of 'home' (Where is it?) and the attendant anxieties about homelessness and the impossibility of returning are perennial themes in these stories. (51)

Because of their haste or poor decisions, the couple locked in the bond of marriage suffers from loneliness and unreciprocated love. There are tense feelings between Lalita and Ahuja. *The Mistress of Spices* demonstrates the hearts torn apart by forced marriage and a lack of understanding in interpersonal relationships in a striking description. According to Chitra Banerjee, excessive

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pampering and emotional deprivation impede a person's ability to mature and maintain satisfying relationships with others as they enter adulthood. These associations are critical in the social context because they give a person a sense of security, respectability, and identity.

The novel by Chitra Banerjee is a profound meditation on solitude as the ultimate human destiny, and the author concludes that relationships with people are inherently unsatisfying. The characters are precise depictions of the real-world challenges that people encounter. Migration to another country with its distinctive culture might lead to alienation. Fate forces human relationships into complex patterns in many subtle ways. These subtle complexities give it an exciting twist, or life may become insipid for most of us. Such uncertainties should be contemplated before the partners in the marital bond decide to sever the bond of matrimony.

Lalita's indecision on whether to call for help as a battered wife leaves her feeling guilty, "One minute I would think Why not. Next minute I would think Chee chee, what Sharam to tell strangers your husband is beating you" (269). She adjusts and accommodates, unlike the modern women who find themselves and are forced into the background by the claims of culture. In an interview, Chitra Banerjee voiced her views to Rettberg,

I have studied both Eastern and Western literature, and I also like to bring the two together in my writing. It is a way to enrich both traditions. I have been influenced by many of the feminist ideas of Virginia W. as I was growing up, somewhat in the same way that Anju was influenced by them. The central idea that women need to have a room of their own is an essential concept in *Sister of My Heart*, mainly as such an idea is foreign to traditional Indian society.

Patriarchy, the ruling social system almost worldwide, proclaims that a woman's place is the home, and her predominant role is that of a wife and mother. Jaina C. Sanga writes: "Moved by the dual forces of the pre-immigration and post-immigration conditions, touched by the pains of women in male-dominated societies, and inspired by the desire to preserve memory" (85). Women began to act. The husband, who is wholly a product of patriarchy, is incompetent at even comprehending the exact desires of his wife. For a male, a wife symbolizes his power, devoid of any specific desire. For Ahuja, his wife symbolizes his domestic and sexual power.

The Indian culture elevates the mother image. Chitra Banerjee challenges the highly revered concept of "motherhood." She also portrays the tragic implications of traditional Indian women trapped in the modern industrialized world and traditional Indian culture. In the past, it was thought that women were most suitable for the kitchen, but the modern woman no longer holds this view. Despite their support for gender equality, the boys of the new generation have yet to let go of the stereotypical male views of a woman's role in the home and the tasks she is expected to perform at home. Lalita, in *The Mistress of Spices*, asks: "Why not I go see the doctor and see what is wrong, why I am not becoming a mother" (269).

In the end, Tilo received Lalita's letter through the mail. Lalita confides in it that she has an organization's help to come out of her house. She also explains the traditional expectations of Indian

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women in their native culture as a daughter and a wife. If Lalita continues to play her role as a daughter and a wife, she has to give up her wishes. So she decides to manage her life to suit her heart and pursue happiness sweetly.

Freedom and richness in the West are often bought, particularly by the immigrant, at the expense of the love and support provided by the extended family or the community. America provides the advantage of anonymity, but it also adds the burden of responsibility and loneliness. Thus, it approves Homi Bhabha's words in his *The Location of Culture*: ". . . his existentialist evocation of the 'I' restores the presence of the marginalized . . . illuminates the madness of racism, the pleasure of pain, the agonistic fantasy of political power" (58). The fear of being unloved and becoming destitute in a foreign land is pictured in the novel. It is their helplessness that forces them to stick to the role of a wife. With that, their future bleakness and fear of being alone are added. Lalita's view is: "I thought of running away, but where could I go? I knew what happened to the girls who left home. They ended up on the streets or as kept women for men far worse than him. At least with him, I had the honor – her lips twist a little at the word- because I was a wife" (102).

Lalita is caught in the trap of an arranged marriage with a balding, aging man, restlessly seeking alternatives to her suffering and discovering, much to her horror and disappointment, that the voices of tradition and social expectation are not different for Indians in America. The story certainly makes it clear that she has been wounded emotionally and spiritually in order to come to terms with her new life in America.

Chitra Banerjee's novel *The Mistress of Spices* portrays an independent, introspective, and self-determined woman, Lalita, who has accepted her life as an immigrant and observes the host country with sensitivity and objectivity. The conflict between the earlier generation and the subsequent generation will persist as it involves a complex discourse on cultural representation, nation, ethnicity, and home. However, with time, women learn to become independent, and most refashion themselves by dismantling the stereotypical portrayal of women. This can be considered a positive sign in the endeavor of those women who are constantly on the lookout for some change and transformation.

The message which the writer conveys is that a woman's emancipation rests neither in suffering quietly like a fatalist nor in repudiating all claims of the family and society like a rebel. She must draw upon her inner strength, which her education and knowledge have bestowed on her, and bring about a compromise between tradition and modernity without losing her own identity. Most of the time, the protagonist's revolt against the exploitations of men, and sometimes they adjust with men. They know that whatever the society's attitude be, the 'new woman' has become conscious of her destination, viz., to liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs forced on her by male dominance. Due to the severity of the psychological and physical effects of marital rape that are exposed through this story, there emerges a greater necessity to approach the issue from the perspectives of both the victim and the perpetrator of such violence. Research on childhood exposure to marital violence (had the disoriented couple been blessed with a child) and long-term

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psychological and physical effects on children may be the further scope for research.

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