



Transnationality in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* and Chitra Banerjee's *The Mistress of Spices*- A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract:

The novel under examination are Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* and Chitra Banerjee's *The Mistress of Spices*, reflecting a myriad of cultural aspects and transnational elements. Vikram Seth's literary works, known for their diverse traditional forms and global settings. Vikram Seth's own experiences, including travels to China and various European nations, contribute to the rich tapestry of his literary journey. In *An Equal Music* (1999), which unfolds in England and transcends a specific homeland, Vikram Seth embraces a transnational identity. The narrative, centred around the world of Western classical music, features characters, Michael and Julia, without Indian origins. However, the cultural references and artistic pursuits deeply rooted in European traditions become evident as the characters traverse various global locations, such as London, Venice, and Vienna, highlighting the theme of transnationality.

On the other hand, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narratives intricately navigate the complex experiences of transnational migration, transcending mere physical relocation. Her stories delve into the multifaceted

connections between identity and place, emphasizing the transformative potential of narratives to articulate the challenges and triumphs of displacement. The focus extends beyond the physical act of migration, encompassing the translation of family traditions across borders, the formation of transnational families, the communication of cultural norms, the bolstering of self-esteem, and the redefinition of the concept of home, even in the face of experiences that border on homelessness. Within the California setting of her novels, particularly *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Divakaruni brings to life the lives of Indian women navigating the complexities of migration to America. These narratives showcase the permeation of Indian culture across cultural, social, religious, and spiritual boundaries, exemplifying the transnational nature of the diasporic experience.

Keywords- Transnationality, Culture, Migration, Immigrants

Introduction

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni skilfully delves into the experiences of Indian expatriate women within a transnational context. The narrative intricately weaves cultural reflections into every facet of the story, portraying the characters' lives as they traverse national borders, entering a multicultural and transnational era. Divakaruni's focus on the challenges faced by immigrant women captures the complexities of adapting to an unfamiliar culture while holding onto their cultural roots.

In essence, the novel provides a compelling exploration of cultural aspects and transnational elements within the immigrant experience. The protagonist, Tilo, serves as a representative of the immigrant psychology, embodying the dualities inherent in their lives—anchored in the culture of their home country while navigating the challenges of assimilating into a new culture. Chitra Divakaruni's narrative offers a rich and nuanced portrayal of the multifaceted experiences of immigrant women, shedding light on their struggles and triumphs.

Tilottama, the protagonist who identifies herself as a Mistress of Spices, becomes a conduit for magical interventions that aid immigrants facing hardships in Oakland, California. The narrative unfolds with Tilo declaring her dual love for spices and her role as their mistress. The magical abilities she acquired on the island serve as a powerful tool to assist immigrants in overcoming their challenges, emphasizing the novel's exploration of the immigrant experience in a transnational context. Tilo's reflection on their life in America and her understanding of the immigrants' longing for the ways they left behind when choosing America further emphasizes the coexistence of Indian and American cultures in contemporary times.

The novel unfolds across diverse settings, traversing from India to an enchanted island and concluding in America with the backdrop of the San Francisco earthquake. Tilo's role in shaping the dreams and solving problems for immigrants illustrates her profound influence over their lives. The narrative introduces characters like Jagjit, showcasing the immigrants' eagerness to adopt aspects of foreign culture, such as learning English words.

The names of Indian foods and sweets, such as biryani, jamuns, and pan parag, serve as cultural markers that resonate with the characters' heritage. Even the depiction of Indian immigrants' homes bears the imprint of Indian culture. The novel transcends geographic boundaries, illustrating the transnational presence of Indian culture globally, from Toronto and Calcutta to Los Angeles and New Jersey. The old mother selects Oakland, California, as the setting for Tilo's grocery store, symbolizing the Indian cultural enclave within a foreign land, surrounded by a global diaspora.

O Tilo', she said, 'I must give you what you ask for, but consider, consider. Better you should choose an Indian settlement, an African market town. Any other place in the world, Qatar Paris Sydney Kingston Town Chaguanas'''. (55)

The novel adeptly portrays how immigrants, including Indians, have assimilated into American life, adapting their lifestyles and clothing. Tilo draws energy from Indian spices like ginger to navigate the intricacies of American culture. Notably, Indian proverbs and sayings, such as "Stop Tilo, don't create snakes out of ropes," gain popularity in America, reflecting the cultural fusion occurring within the immigrant community. The narrative follows characters from diverse countries who have made Oakland their home, showcasing their ability to adjust to American culture while preserving their cultural roots.

The Americans in the novel exhibit a genuine curiosity about Indian people, demonstrating interest in their social, political, religious, and cultural lives. This curiosity becomes a catalyst for cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Tilo and the American engage in discussions about their respective cultures, highlighting the differences between life in India and America. Haroun, appreciating Indian culture, embraces the tradition of removing shoes at the entrance to a house, symbolizing his openness to experiencing and understanding different cultural practices. Tilo's grocery shop becomes a space for cultural exploration, where the American visitor learns about Indian food items, fostering a deeper appreciation for the richness of Indian culinary traditions.

These cultural aspects not only accompany the immigrants but also transcend borders, firmly establishing their presence in the transnational era. Tilo, the protagonist, keenly recognizes the intricate relationships between American and Indian people, acknowledging the unique narratives that emerge from these cross-cultural interactions. Her expressions of blessings and good wishes for individuals like Haroun seamlessly incorporate elements from both Indian and Islamic traditions, reflecting the rich tapestry of cultural influences.

As the narrative unfolds, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni delves into the evolving dynamics of the immigrant community, particularly the shifting preferences of Indian girls who express interest in marrying Americans. This exploration highlights the process of acculturation as immigrants adapt to American ways of life. Tilo, having undergone a transformative journey, seeks to convey her apologies and affection to Haroun while offering warnings about the potential challenges associated with their immigrant dreams.

Similarly, Vikram Seth employs a similar approach to depict cultural and transnational elements in his literary works. *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth, set in Europe with European characters, unfolds as a poignant love story centred around emotionally charged musicians. The influence of Russian novelist Pushkin on this novel is noteworthy, as it explores profound themes of love and music, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. Seth's ability to seamlessly incorporate diverse cultural elements contributes to the transnational resonance of his work.

Vikram Seth's body of work not only delves into Indian issues but also explores international themes, addressing contemporary challenges in his novels. Reviewers and critics have positioned him as a prominent figure in Indian English literature, recognizing his scholarly impact with a transnational reach.

Seth's works embody the themes and linguistic freedom characteristic of this literary period, adding a distinctive voice to the broader discourse of contemporary literature. This creative freedom has allowed novelists from this era to explore a wide range of themes and styles.

Vikram Seth, as a postcolonial writer, adeptly navigates the presentation of both Indian and foreign cultures. In the tradition of expatriate writing, the border-crossing experiences of migrants often lead to a divided psyche, and Indian novelists in English settling in other countries contribute significantly to this literary tradition.

Music emerges as a dominant theme in Seth's novels, with characters such as artists, singers, musicians, and dancers from various countries representing their respective cultures. Despite all the characters being Europeans, Seth's deep love for music transcends national borders. In an interview, Vikram Seth notes that his

musical training has autobiographical roots. Trained as a musician during his school days, he emphasizes how playing Indian music or singing Indian songs draws him back into the world of his novel, considering it a form of work by other means. His headmaster at school recognized him as a trained artist and musician, and Mr. Gurudayal Singh's authentic report about him is worth quoting:

Master's teaching Vikram has sent in the most glowing reports about him. He has a keen and incisive mind, and is very quick in getting to the heart of any matter. He has an accurate ear for music, and is a delightful companion in every way. He has been working on a monumental quiz book in partnership with a friend of his. (1988:11)

In both his poetic and prose works, Vikram Seth intricately details his journeys to European countries and China, transforming these experiences into sources of inspiration for his novels. This approach aligns with the recognition of Indian English Fiction as a significant source for the systematic study of cultural contact and change, with a focus on the Indian worldview as a central element in acculturation processes.

Seth's study tour to China deeply influenced him, allowing him to observe and absorb the social, religious, and cultural aspects of the people. His mother's encouragement during his return journey to write a travel book based on these experiences underscores the pivotal role of personal connections and familial support in his creative process. Seth's reflections on a sense of belonging and connection with his extended family highlight a universal theme that transcends cultural boundaries, resonating across diverse extended families, whether Indian, Italian, or Jewish.

Reviewers and literary figures consistently laud Vikram Seth as one of the most popular and representative Indian novelists writing in English. His ability to delve into cultural contexts and explore encounters between Indian culture and that of other countries, such as China and Burma, is widely appreciated. Seth's literary work adeptly captures the contemporary social structures of both a nation and the global society, offering modern ideas and perspectives rooted in his experiences as a transnational traveller.

Chitra Divakaruni skilfully integrates elements of ancient Indian culture and traditions into the lives of modern characters residing in California, particularly in Berkeley. These cultural elements act as a connecting thread between the characters' heritage and their present experiences.

In her novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni seamlessly interweaves elements of Indian and American culture. The migrated Indians bring with them facets of Indian culture, encompassing food items, spice names, rites, rituals, and customs. Both narratives unfold in San Francisco, emphasizing the transnational

aspects that shape the storyline. Various events and incidents within these novels mirror Indian cultural elements and explore the intricacies of transnational experiences.

Likewise, Vikram Seth's novels, including *An Equal Music*, present a rich tapestry of popular culture while offering insight and sensitivity. Seth's encounters with diverse cultures have undoubtedly enriched his perspective, vividly reflected in his works. His writing showcases profound respect for and engagement with various cultural ethos, drawing from a broad range of experiences and addressing diverse locations through the exploration of themes, forms, and genres.

An Equal Music, set in England, transcends localized themes, emphasizing Seth's transnational identity. The novel can be characterized as a conservative work, centring around an English musician tasked with upholding the rich European tradition of music. Opening with an epigraph from John Donne, the novel's title is derived from Donne's poetic verses, repeating the word "equal" five times and evoking the concept of life after death—a harmonious equilibrium transcending oppositions.

The introduction of Michael and Julia creates a cultural tapestry representing their respective nations. European characters in the novel engage in music and cultural activities, reflecting their connection to their heritage. The narrative unfolds in various locations, with characters, including musicians, artists, and singers, traveling and engaging in cross-cultural encounters, emphasizing the theme of transnationality.

Music plays a pivotal role in their lives, and the novel explores how their pasts and cultural backgrounds shape their experiences. The characters maintain strong ties to their families and homes, reflecting a deep connection to their cultural roots. The second section of the novel delves into Michael's busy rehearsal schedule, highlighting the dedication and commitment of the characters to their music and their cultural heritage.

I get through the rehearsal A day passes then another. I buy bread and milk. I eat, drink and bathe, I shave. Exhausted by wakefulness, I sleep. I teach. I attend rehearsals. I turn on the news and absorb words. I exchange greetings with our porter and the other denizens of our building. As once before, after I fled Vienna, My brain and body direct themselves. (47)

In the novel, European artists, musicians, and singers frequently travel for rehearsals and performances, embodying a new and cosmopolitan outlook on life and culture. The characters' backgrounds, family situations, and the dynamics within Julia McNicholl's family, including her mother's return to Austria after her husband's death, contribute to the intricate narrative. Additional characters like Dave and Phil add depth to the storyline.

Religious celebrations and festivals hold significant memories for the characters, serving as key elements in representing their cultural identities. Virginie's absence leaves Michael feeling lonely, prompting reflections on the solitude that ensues. A pre-Christmas party hosted by music critic Nicholas Spare brings various musicians together, sparking discussions about modern music and opera. The celebration with Mr. and Mrs. Farmby, along with their visits to different places, reflects the cultural travels of the characters.

Michael's recollection of his first meeting with Julia during a student concert in Vienna, where he was captivated by her music, is a poignant moment. The musicians' reunion at Wighmore Hall is portrayed as a significant cultural gathering. The third part of the novel delves into Michael and Julia's romantic reconnection after a decade. Their visit to a picture gallery symbolizes their shared appreciation for art and culture. However, Julia's revelation of her marriage comes as a surprise to Michael.

In the fourth part, Julia joins Michael for a musical performance, sharing details about her personal life, including her husband, an American banker from Boston. Despite their worldwide performances, their personal lives are marked by sorrow and unhappiness. The revelation of Julia's deafness adds a layer of complexity, and Michael contemplates whether their visit to Vienna can restore what they have lost in London.

The fifth part of the novel, set in Vienna, portrays the musicians immersed in rehearsals. Michael seizes the opportunity to talk with Julia, and their travels to various countries for musical performances underscore the novel's overarching theme of transnationality. The novel portrays the sad and unhappy lives of the protagonists, Michael and Julia, while also highlighting their personal and cultural attachments. Michael, in his frustration, contemplates leaving Vienna behind for good.

Despite their personal struggles, these artists continue to captivate audiences with their musical performances. Michael and Julia are restrained by their cultural principles and do not allow their romantic feelings to transgress societal norms.

The sixth part of the novel takes place in Venice, where Julia joins the group of musicians. These artists, musicians, and singers continue to transcend national borders as they perform, bringing their respective cultures with them. This interaction with the culture of their native countries enriches their experiences.

In the seventh part of the novel, crises unfold rapidly, prompting moments of self-reflection. Michael returns to London, hoping for Julia's return. However, she becomes increasingly distant, leading to greater sadness for both of them.

Go, then, with breathing tide, and do not make a scene, and learn wisdom of the little dog, who visits from elsewhere, and who knows that what is, is, and, O harder, knowledge, that what is not, is not.” (306)

In the novel's concluding part, Vikram Seth utilizes musical instruments as a means for the artists to navigate their unhappiness and frustration, with the violin emerging as a symbolic source of joy in their lives. Michael, the protagonist, reflects on his violin's seemingly intuitive understanding of his suffering, expressing it through its music.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary work is notably informed by her firsthand encounters as a first-generation immigrant, navigating the complexities of identity situated between cultural and traditional realms. Her proficiency in capturing the cultural dialectics inherent in the immigrant experience aligns her with other contemporary writers exploring similar themes. Having resided in India for 19 years prior to her immigration to the USA, Divakaruni's narratives feature protagonists grappling with the intricate interplay of traditional values embedded in their consciousness.

The stories unfold against a backdrop of conflicting values, giving rise to the emergence of multiple consciousnesses within the female protagonists. This internal conflict prompts them to not only scrutinize prevailing societal practices but also to question their own evolving identities. The ensuing identity crisis leads to a transformative redefinition of the 'self.' The women depicted in these texts navigate and reconcile with the realization that their identity is a synthesis of experiences from both the East and the West.

On the contrary, Seth's cosmopolitan perspective is evident as he demonstrates a keen interest in the distinctive features of various cultures encountered in his literary explorations. His approach is characterized by unwavering honesty and sincerity, consistently striving to depict the external reality with impartiality. Whether depicting an American landscape, a Chinese experience, or an incident at home, Seth's pen adeptly captures the realistic essence of each scenario.

The structure of Seth's body of work does not conform easily to a singular pattern, given his radical genre shifts with nearly every book he has authored. Furthermore, the settings of his books vary dramatically, spanning not only across India but also encompassing locales such as China, California, London, and Venice in his latest work, each imbued with diasporic potential.

Seth's literary acclaim stems from his ability to narrate experiences with charm and poignancy, addressing both ordinary and profound aspects of life with intellectual acuity. It is safe to assert that Seth occupies a distinctive position in world literature today, with his books exhibiting a richness of life and intellectual brilliance that is comparatively rare in Indian writing in English.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) unfolds as a mystical narrative, illuminating the nuanced experiences of characters grappling with the immigrant journey. Symbolically, the novel encapsulates the profound struggles and internal conflicts confronted by individuals who have traversed geographical, political, social, and cultural landscapes from their native India to establish new lives in unfamiliar territories. The central protagonist and other characters, existing in this foreign milieu, find themselves entangled between their cultural heritage and the uncharted terrain of their newfound world.

Fundamentally, the novel emerges as a compelling exploration of both cultural dimensions and transnational elements inherent in the immigrant experience. Through the character of Tilo, the protagonist, Divakaruni effectively embodies the psyche of immigrants, encapsulating the dualities that define their lives—a profound connection to the culture of their homeland juxtaposed with the ongoing navigation of challenges associated with assimilating into a novel cultural milieu.

In Vikram Seth's novel, *An Equal Music*, the narrative unfolds as a poignant and poetic love story centred around two musicians, narrated in the first person from the vantage point of the protagonist, Michael Holmes. Resonating with the nuances of a lonely and sensitive artist, Michael, a violinist based in London, becomes the focal point of the novel. The storyline commences with Michael's unsuccessful romantic entanglements with Virginie, a young French woman.

Given the European backdrop, the narrative acquires transnational dimensions, with European characters assuming significant roles in anchoring the novel at an international level. The portrayal of European artists becomes instrumental in representing their cultural practices through various performances held in different locations. These artists emerge as authentic custodians of their cultural heritage, practicing and showcasing their singing and dancing, thereby preserving their cultural identity.

A notable feature in the novel is the collaborative performances of Michael and Julia, which adhere to moral constraints. The lives of these singers and musicians are characterized by a division between their homeland and the lands they visit. The alternating settings of the novel, oscillating between Venice and Vienna,

not only enhance the narrative's transnational dimension but also underscore the dualities inherent in the lives of these artists, straddling the realms of their origins and the foreign landscapes they traverse.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Vikram Seth adeptly navigate their protagonists through a transformative journey, evolving from a state of limited self-perception largely shaped by external perspectives to a profound understanding of their inner selves. The narratives crafted by these authors do not romanticize this transformative journey, portraying it as neither pleasurable nor straightforward. Instead, they underscore the inevitability of change in an individual's life. As societal norms and ideologies undergo evolution, individuals are compelled to adapt and respond to these changes, thereby reflecting their "attitude towards change" as a pivotal determinant of self-awareness.

Divakaruni and Seth strategically utilize the parameters of self-awareness as transformative portals, guiding their characters from a reliance on external influences towards a profound understanding of their inner selves and those of others. These characters traverse diverse societal norms and cultures, embarking on a journey of self-discovery within an envisioned utopian world.

However, the narrative techniques used by both the novelists are different. Vikram Seth is highly realistic in his narration and on the other hand Chitra Banerjee presents fusion of reality and fantasy in her works. Vikram Seth novels focus dilemmas faced mostly by male characters, whereas Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's sympathy lies with the stories and struggles of female characters. Both the novelists end their novel in open ended style. The Ends are neither happy nor sad. Characters learn to accept their diasporic status and make compromises.

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