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Fractured Identity ~ The Jagged Path of Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's

*The Mistress of Spices*

by

Lisa Lamor

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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in

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“Fractured Identity ~ The Jagged Path of Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s  
*The Mistress of Spices*”

Lisa Lamor

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

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## Abstract

Representation of fractured identity issues is a thematic element powerfully present in the work of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Although identity is a commonly explored theme in general, it is through fragmentation in her novels that struggles are often identified and trauma is illustrated. Complex, fragmenting experiences of persons living in the Indian diaspora are frequently present in novels by Divakaruni along with continual employment of fracturing in terms of structure, imagery, plot, language, and character.

In order to illustrate the presence of fracturization in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literature, in this thesis I do an extensive textual examination of her first full-length novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1999). In the analysis, I present multiple instances of fracturing including structurally and thematically. I also closely examine the condition of fractured identity in the diasporic characters from India specifically represented in the novel. Furthermore, I focus on the gendered representations of fracturization in the novel and the various levels of success in terms of how they encounter and maneuver fragmentation.

By performing a thorough analysis of *The Mistress of Spices*, I illustrate that multiple elements of the structure, characters, and plot within the novel are indicative of fracturization and fractured identity. The negotiation of fracturization becomes relevant, especially in terms of the ways that Divakaruni challenges gender-based assumptions of success. Furthermore, in studying fractured identity as a result of diaspora specifically present in Divakaruni's novel featuring an Indian-American female protagonist, I assert that by successfully processing fractured identity issues, the women in the story are ultimately empowered.

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## Introduction

*Writing must come out of what we know, what we feel.... But ultimately it must transcend all that to reach across time and space and memory to touch those who have never – and who will never – live as we have lived. What else is literature for? Because if it is only the specifics of a culture we want to record, surely a sociologist or an anthropologist could do it better.*

~ Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Exploration of cultural worlds and issues is done with the assistance of many lenses, but often times the narrative is one of the most powerful ways to convey experiences. By weaving fictional elements on top of a realistic base, fiction authors often achieve what more research-based methods cannot – personalization. Instead of reading of studies and numbers and percentages, readers of narratives can experience stories about people and their lives. Such stories become profoundly important because of the ways they can illustrate life so poignantly, providing a context in which characters and plots generate emotion. As the characters in the novel live, struggle, change, and grow, the reader is able to follow their paths and become invested in their outcomes. In that way, literature has an impact that is hard to grasp sometimes in more sociological or anthropological approaches.

During the years since India's independence, the number of people of Indian

descent living in the United States has risen to over 2.2 million, a figure that has more than doubled during the last twenty years alone (Kamdar 28). Gauri Bhattacharya points out: “The global Indian diaspora is emerging as a critical phenomenon for twenty-first-century researchers to explore” (65). As those numbers have increased, the amount of narratives that seek to convey the experiences of diasporic Indian Americans has grown as well.

Literature from the postcolonial generation is not simply about telling a story though; it is also about creating a context in which to describe and define experiences. For immigrants to the United States, the diasporic experience is ripe with challenge and struggle, on both a community and individual level. According to Bhattacharya, “immigrants do not simply accept the ‘melting pot’ roles expected of assimilated Americans” – instead they continually redefine their sense of identity (66). A consequential deduction from that line of thinking is that the “transnational movement presents itself as an important influence upon psychological, physical, and public health” (Bhattacharya 66). In order to express experiences as well as internal struggles, immigrant authors often turn to narratives as a format in which such issues can be explored. Due to the complexity of such exploration, “narratives are not like photographs of lives – they are discourses, the deconstruction of which will enable new narratives to be formulated” (Swartz 517).

Writing that shares individual stories and creates conversation is a powerful force in the endeavor to understand the immigrant experience. According to Gayatri Spivak, “it is with narratives that a literary critic negotiates” (430). Narratives are like pictures of everyday life, even fictitiously. Therefore, it becomes essential to explore the existing

narratives of the Indian English writing community in order to make observations about experiences, challenges, and perspectives of Indian-American immigrants. In addition this reminds us that if we are able, as literary critics, to focus on the text and not indulge immediately in sociological applications, it becomes possible to examine narratives more effectively based on individual experiences within them.

In 1976, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni left Calcutta, India as a young adult and moved to the United States. Her experience of immigrating “caused Divakaruni to reevaluate her homeland’s culture, and specifically its treatment of women” (Softky 26). Published in 1997, her first full-length novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, followed a growing and impressive list of collections of poetry and short stories including the critically acclaimed *Arranged Marriage*. Full of people negotiating the immigrant experience, in *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni skillfully “builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and the community” (Merlin 1). The main character and narrator of the novel is a woman named Tilottama (Tilo) who was originally born in India, then trained to be a “mistress of spices” by a mystical teacher who resides on a magical island, and eventually sent to look over a spice shop in Oakland, California. Due to her diverse experience and transnational existence, Tilo is “chameleon like, [and] she keeps changing throughout the novel, making clear how complex is the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land” (Mitra). Throughout the novel Tilo is joined by a host of other people that share aspects of life as immigrants, but each also has their own individual story.

In Chapter Two of this thesis, the specific structure of the novel as well as the experiences of the characters are explored in depth. Within that exploration, it becomes



apparent that fracturization and subsequent fractured identity issues are featured throughout the novel. By carefully examining the presence of fracturization, it becomes apparent that Divakaruni is relaying a pain in the splintering that occurs for people during the experience of immigration. Within that fragmenting existence, characters in *The Mistress of Spices* explore their individual and collective identities. Homi Bhaba asserts that “the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting” (44). The characters are very clearly torn apart, often into multiple pieces both physically and emotionally. In Chapter Two, those elements of fracturization are identified and examples are presented to illustrate how it affects the characters and their sense of fractured identity.

Beyond examining the presence of fracturization, it becomes crucial to explore how characters maneuver their lives and identity struggles. It is clear that “[a]s migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioral boundaries.... One’s life and roles change. With them, identities change as well” (Espín, “Gender” 241). According to an explorative study of psychological issues of Indians in diaspora, it becomes evident that while Indian-Americans are challenged in extreme ways they are simultaneously confronting increases in self-awareness and a deeper sense of identity. Therefore, they are also often able to successfully redefine themselves and forge a new identity out of self-reliance and inner strength: “Although such experiences are stressful, they also provide opportunities for creating a ‘new’ identity” (Ramaswami, et al. 151). Some characters are clearly more successful than others in resolving their fractured identity issues and/or developing a new identification. Chapter Three of this thesis evaluates the way in which multiple characters experience and negotiate fracturization.

Additionally, in Chapter Three the gender-specific representations of character development are explored. Most researchers agree that gender plays a crucial role in the way in which immigrants experience diaspora: "...at each step of the migration process, women and men encounter different experiences" (Espín, "Gender" 241). Divakaruni acknowledges the differing experiences in *The Mistress of Spices* but also goes one step further by challenging expected gender-based responses, reactions, and resolutions in regards to fractured identity issues. In doing so, she is able to provide commentary on identity formation and the fracturing process that is involved in settlement into a new culture that is unique to each gender. Simultaneously, Divakaruni provides a reaffirming message of hope and strength within specifically female negotiation of fracturization.

Finally, the Conclusion of this thesis seeks to explore where else such elements of fracturization and fractured identity are exhibited in postcolonial, South Asian literature and specifically within the canon of Divakaruni's works. *The Mistress of Spices* is one example in which these ideas can be clearly identified and explored through literary analysis, but it is not the only narrative upon which such research is applicable. By establishing a pattern of fracturization and fractured identity in this literature, it becomes apparent that there are repeated experiences and struggles and messages of hope presented in multiple examples of literature.

## **Chapter One – Review of Literature**

Distinction based on various factors is vitally important in postcolonial literary inspection. Diasporic literature likewise requires analysis in terms of specific ethnicity and gender – of author and/or primary characters. In this review of literature, a brief discussion of postcolonial study and the Indian-American diasporic experience is followed by exploration of more specific scholarship on the writings of diasporic Indian women writing in English. Within the diasporic literature, immigrant psychology and identity formation is a theme frequently explored in scholarly articles, essays, and books; such psychological and identity-based concepts are examined here as well. Finally, the review culminates with the scholarship regarding Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel, *The Mistress of Spices*. This concluding focus on Divakaruni serves as a prelude to the close analysis and examination of the novel (based on issues of fractured identity as the central argument) presented in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis.

### **Postcolonial Literary Studies**

In her article “Postcolonial Theory,” Violet Lunga defines postcolonial theory as “a complex field of study, encompassing an array of matters that include issues such as identity, gender, race, racism, and ethnicity” (193). Identifying theorists Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhaba, and Edward Saïd as the “experts” that have done the theorizing in the field, Lunga asserts: “These scholars have denounced Eurocentrism, promoted difference, and represented a postcolonial voice” (194). Lunga points out that a specific application of the word ‘postcolonial’ applies to literature that was written by people who were once

colonized, and “focuses on the ways in which writers articulate and celebrate cultural identity/ies and delve into questions of agency and resistance” (Lunga 192).

One of the leading postcolonial theorists is Homi Bhabha, and his book *The Location of Culture* is a great influence on the field of study. Acknowledging that cultural identity is a basis for contemporary narratives, Bhabha identifies they are written “in the midst of the everyday” producing unique literature: “From the margins of modernity, at the insurmountable extremes of storytelling, we encounter the question of cultural difference as the perplexity of living and writing” (161). The new perspectives that occur in the postcolonial condition, Bhabha points out, are significant in what they provide the reader as unique from literature that came before colonization. For example, the “partial eyes” that occur in the process of certain writing (based on the feeling of “invisibleness” associated with questioning identity), “most significantly... bear witness to a woman’s writing of the postcolonial condition” (Bhabha 53). That gendered, reflective perspective is one that has occurred, according to Bhabha, since colonization as opportunity to voice narratives has expanded to include the subaltern.

The texts that were produced during the time following India’s independence clearly fall under the broad umbrella of postcolonial literary study. However, within that time period people also began to move out of India and establish themselves in other nations in record numbers. In light of the massive migration of Indians, the literature being produced is also worthy of considering within the light of specifically postcolonial immigrant, or diasporic Indian literature.

### **Indian-American Diaspora**

According to Pablo Shiladitya Bose, in an article for the *Journal of Intercultural*

*Studies*, “the range of diasporic transnational practices is not monolithic but instead governed by differences in class, gender, race, sexuality, and a host of other distinctions” (125). When people leave their home countries, the diasporas certainly “disrupt [a] tidy view of nation, narration, and belonging” (Bose 119). Bose contends that it is essential to examine “the diverse and complex experiences of resettlement, integration and ongoing relationships with putative homelands” (120).

Because of the many varying influences, not everyone experiences immigration in the same way. In the 2003 introduction of a collection titled International Perspectives on Transnational Migration, the three authors – Peggy Levitt, Josh DeWind, and Steven Vertovec – begin with an assertion that consideration of differences is of paramount importance when discussing immigrant experience and perspective. They assert that “aspects of migrants lives that were largely ignored by much of the early transnational migration scholarship ought to be taken into account” (568). Particular attention must be paid to multiple elements of individuality within the group, including “the ways in which transnational migration is gendered” (Levitt et al 568). Following differentiation on an ethnic level, the authors then emphasize attention on how men and women experience migration differently: “[G]ender is a central organizing principle of migrant life” (Levitt et al 568). Furthermore, Levitt, DeWind, and Vertovec emphasize the importance of “memories, stories, and artistic creations that are harnessed to express transnational membership” (571).

In her article, “Model Minority and Martial Violence,” Margaret Abraham looks at many aspects of the immigrant experience, and stresses that “ethnicity, gender, class, race, and citizenship are all important aspects of the construction of self and community

for South Asian immigrants in the United States” (198). Women who find themselves in diaspora often find they are a member of multiple cultures simultaneously. They are members of their ethnic group, as well as new members of the overarching culture of a host country, while simultaneously negotiating gender positions within each; the expectations of behavior (from self and other) vary greatly. Abraham asserts this is a difficult balancing act for diasporic women: “As an ethnic minority, South Asian immigrant women... have to cope with semipermeable boundaries that allow them... to partially internalize the norms and values of the dominant culture while being simultaneously excluded by the dominant group from total membership in that culture “ (198). Therefore, the way in which a person’s experience culminates is expressly influenced by their gender as well as their educational and socioeconomic status. Their experiences often become the focus of literature that is written by diasporic authors.

### **Writing in Diaspora**

According to Edward Saïd in his article, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals,” the writer plays an integral role in “testifying to a country’s or a region’s experience, thereby giving that experience a public identity forever inscribed in the global discursive agenda” (27). A specific subset of testimonies is made up of women writing narratives that cross geographical boundaries following India’s independence, including esteemed authors such as Anita Desai, Baharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. As Inderpal Grewal pointed out in her book *Transnational America*, these authors are also women who were “born just before or after Indian independence, a generation wrestling with the legacy of colonialism and the problems of decolonization” (40). After the change in immigration laws that took place in 1965:

Upper-caste South Asian migrants educated in English literature... came to the United States in larger numbers [and] Indian-American literature was produced which focused on the experiences in North America and gained the attention of a reading public in the United States and of scholars of literature. (Grewal 61)

Many of the immigrants during that time were women, and some were able to read and write in English, and thereby started to contribute their narratives. As the diaspora has grown, so has the production of diasporic women's literature.

According to Lisa Lau in her article "Making the Difference: The Differing Presentations and Representations of South Asia in the Contemporary Fiction of Home and Diasporic South Asian Women Writers," the literature of South Asian women who immigrated to the U.S. and women who live and write in South Asia is strikingly different, both in style and content. Therefore, Lau asserts that "the geographical locations of the authors influence, to no small degree, their approach to writing in English, the audience for whom they write, and the concerns which they choose to draw attention towards" (238). American-Indian women are "the most prolific of the contemporary South Asian women writers" (Lau 238). In an example Lau gives of novels produced in 2001 and 2002, almost two thirds were new authors as well. Noting the increase, Lau also provides a differentiation between such emerging authors and those that are more established: "Although all the debut novels and short stories [on the list she provided] have located their plots and characters in South Asia, Divakaruni... did not choose to do so" and instead focused on "writing of the diasporic experience for South Asians in USA" (241).

Authors such as Divakaruni who focus on the issues of diaspora find themselves in a unique spot, both personally and within their text, which Lau asserts causes unique struggles (243). As a result of (or within) those struggles, identity is a theme that becomes quickly evident in the literature diasporic women produce as they “write and discuss at length the confusion of identity they are experiencing” (Lau 241). Lau contends that certain repeated elements or themes are often seen in diasporic South Asian women’s writing. Usually geographic location of the women characters in the novel fits into one of just a few categories, including “women who were born and bred in South Asia and subsequently have either been sent or have chosen to live in the West” (244). In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo certainly fits into that category. Furthermore, Lau points out that the travel from East to West is uniquely represented by diasporic women authors: “It is a move from the known to the unknown.... It may be a traumatic journey” (247).

In addition to travel, Lau discusses the exploration of identity issues within South Asian women’s writing, asserting its presence: “Identity is one of the most common themes in their literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful, and only occasionally rewarding” (252). While many contemporary women writing in South Asia “write with a sense of attempting to make their individual voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations,” diasporic women’s writing has different characteristics (Lau 252). Women of diaspora, according to Lau, instead “almost always, without exception, testify to a sense of dual or multiple identities” (252). That negotiation of identity issues within the literature qualifies the writing of women of diaspora as worthy of specific literary critique. It is through their



stories that their unique experiences, their perspective, and their identity struggles can often be witnessed.

### **Exploring Identity Issues**

The focus of a majority of Indian-American literature has been the struggles of immigrants to navigate complex changes in their existence, including issues of cultural and personal identity. Identity issues that pervade in diasporic Indian communities is overviewed in an article by Ajaya Kumar Sahoo titled “Issues of identity in the Indian Diaspora: A Transnational Perspective.” In it, he asserts: “Immigrants often face the problem of identity at the initial stage of their settlement in the host society” (88). Sahoo defines individual identity as emphasizing “how one sees the world from a particular position and relative to what aspects or how one experiences self-hood” (89). Individual identity is often explored, according to Sahoo, based on certain elements of a diaspora, including language, religion, cuisine, and the arts.

Trinh Minh-ha considers issues of identity within postcolonial literature in her article “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.” In encompassing both the self and other simultaneously, the postcolonial woman is in a unique search for identity. Minh-ha asserts: “The search for an identity is... usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized” (Minh-ha 415). The women who are telling their stories – whether it be in film or novels or other mediums – are speaking from a cultural perspective, writes Minh-ha: “An insider can speak with authority about her own culture, and she’s referred to as the source of authority in this manner” (417).

However, that insider perspective is compromised the moment that the woman steps away from being just on the inside and instead looks in from the outside as well (Minh-ha 418). That dichotomy of roles is a tricky spot for postcolonial women to inhabit that further contributes to questions of individual identity: “She who knows she cannot speak of [external and internal differences] without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story” (Minh-ha 418).

In her book *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora*, Sandra Ponzanesi asserts that the “very quality of dispossession – a kind of haunting by otherness – is migrant literature’s greatest strength” (11). Simultaneously, Ponzanesi acknowledges that because of the “separation from tradition and obligations, [immigration] is not a process devoid of pain and alienation” (12). Gathering stories by authors that all come from Indian or African background, Ponzanesi is hesitant however to lump them into a group, saying instead that the authors:

... resent any affiliation with such a cluster, since it limits them to the ‘competent representation’ of their Indian or African backgrounds without accounting for the free open spaces that each author traces for her/himself and that exceed nation, allegation, and restriction. The strict specificity and individuality of each oeuvre must be respected and the autonomy and original achievements recognized within the vaster connections and aspirations. 23

Individuality in terms of authorship as well as content has to be taken into consideration. This is especially important considering how individuality affects a sense of self and the formation of a subsequent identity.

The stories of women in diaspora bear great importance to author Oliva Espín, and serve as the framework for her book *Women Crossing Boundaries*. Espín explores how the condition of immigrants is largely overlooked by psychology, but should be considered as profoundly important in terms of individual psychological growth, development and behavior. Social sciences have studied, observed, researched, and reported on the conditions of immigration as a sociocultural, economic, religious, political phenomenon... but Espín points out that the scholarship regarding individual development is largely absent (15). She asserts that although the contradictions involved in immigrant experiences (specifically for women) can lead to emotional or other problems, most immigrant women “manage to survive and emerge from the emotional struggle” (Espín 10). Espín’s goal is to contribute to understanding how the experiences affect the individual, specifically by “using the medium of personal narrative of the psychology of migration” (10). By examining the writing of immigrant people, Espín is able to make observations about not only their writing but also their experiences.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* is a powerful example of the kind of narrative that deserves inspection on an individualized level regarding identity formation, specifically in terms of the presence of fragmentation and fracturization.

### **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni ~ *The Mistress of Spices***

In her novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) Divakaruni weaves a tale that incorporates magic and mysticism side by side with the gritty reality of life for a variety of poignant characters. Divakaruni’s writing tackles the intricate and multifaceted identity issues faced by immigrants, with an emphasis on those experienced by women.

*The Mistress of Spices* is full of people negotiating the immigrant experience, and Divakaruni skillfully “builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and the community” (Merlin). The main character and narrator of the novel, Tilottama (Tilo) is originally born in India, then trained to be a “mistress of spices” by a mystical teacher who resides on a magical island, and eventually sent to look over a spice shop in Oakland, California.

In her book, *On the Outside Looking In(dian): Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad*, Phillipa Kafka credits Divakaruni as one of the diasporic authors who “write eloquently on the issues that arise either for them or for their characters in the West” (26). Kafka tracks the development of Tilo and observes that when the young Tilo (then named Bhagyavati) meets with the sea serpents, they do not want her to leave them: “They predict that if she does not remain with them, everything she possesses – the ability to see, to speak, her name, even her identity will be lost” (158). Such exploration of identity persists throughout the novel. Kafka recognizes those struggles and explores them on level of self, sexuality, and relationships with others. She asserts that Divakaruni portrays such issues powerfully and effectively on an individual level: “In highly poetic language within the context of a feminist myth based of Tilottama, Divakaruni conveys the feelings of all the characters, their problems in their everyday existence” (Kafka 163). By superimposing the issues of individuals in diaspora on to a backdrop of a well-known Indian myth, Divakaruni succeeds in telling a beautifully rich, complex story that resonates.

One of the ways in which Divakaruni crafts her story and the exploration of the many aspects of immigrant experiences is to employ her own unique form of

personalized magical realism. In many stories created by postcolonial authors, there are multiple elements of realism and mysticism that exhibit simultaneously. Gita Rajan in her article “Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* Deploying Mystical Realism” offers such notable authors as Gabriel Garcia Marquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Laura Esquivel (*Like Water for Chocolate*), Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*), and Divakaruni as examples of authors who utilize magic realism to really connect myth, cultural history, traditions, and modernity in one narrative. Rajan recognizes that Divakaruni, however, does not make those connections in efforts that are overtly focused on grandiose goals of sociocultural levels. She instead asserts that Divakaruni works more with the individual.

By not attempting to effect huge changes through the usual tropes of history, politics, and fantasy as magic realism would, Divakaruni is able to work on a smaller scale and address the psychological needs of her disempowered cast of characters. (Rajan 217)

Rajan also points out that the characters – particularly Tilo – are portrayed as complex and multi-faceted, indicative of their status as diasporic individuals who are both internally and externally struggling. According to Rajan, “the characters themselves are not fully fleshed out; it is their hopes, desires, and pain that makes them recognizable as typical diasporic, exilic, marginalized, damaged figures” (219). Within that chaotic existence, Rajan remarks how Divakaruni focuses on the main character, even going so far as to “sequentially alter Tilo’s name/identity to match the shifting contours of the plot” further enhancing the focus on the individual and identity issues (218).

In her article “Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* and

Naylor's *Mama Day*," Susana Vega-González also discusses the kind of magic realism to which Rajan was referring, but calls it instead 'ethnic magic realism' in order to specially qualify it as work done by diasporic women authors who "pay tribute to their ancestors and their childhood cultures" (10). Vega-González describes the novel as one which delves into a "world of magic, myth, and fantasy amidst the realism of their daily existence" (2). Within that magic/real crossover, Divakaruni presents the main character Tilo as a coalescing of "a series of opposites in a symbolic undoing of boundaries: young/old, human/otherworldly, life/death" (Vega-González 4). Those opposites along with the concept of boundaries are explored throughout the novel, Vega-González asserts, and are indicative of a "dual selfhood" (4). Vega-González discusses spices, and naming, and other elements of the novel as ways in which the 'ethnic magic realism' ultimately provides Tilo an opportunity for resolution. "At the end of the novel, Tilo's dilemma is resolved," Vega-González points out, when she achieves "a transnational hybridized identity" (5). By examining boundaries and duality, Divakaruni is also simultaneously examining and validating the struggle concerning identity for women in diaspora.

Many people have referred to *The Mistress of Spices* as a modern fairy tale in which 'real life' is depicted in a beautiful, almost mystical way. In her article, "Genre and Gender in the Cultural Reproduction of India as 'Wonder Tale'" Cristina Bacchilega contends that *The Mistress of Spices* is an example of a contemporary tale of magic that engages the reader in folklore and a perpetuation of India as a "wonder-ful" land while simultaneously challenging boundaries (179). Bacchilega cites the necessity of such study because she believes that conceiving of India as "wonder tale" continues to "play a

significant role in the transnational conception and reception of some of the most successful literature of the South Asian diaspora” (180). She points out that “both Bengali storytelling and the immigrant experience are thus represented by a singular and mythified retelling” (Bacchilega 187). According to Bacchilega, the success of *The Mistress of Spices* is directly related to the boundaries that are crossed in the novel and the applicability of the story to multiple ethnic minority groups:

‘[D]issolving boundaries’ not only applies to globalization as a whole but also speaks directly to the building of coalitions between different yet equally stereotyped groups – for instance, in the novel, between Asian Indians and American Indians. (187)

As she continues her examination of the “wonder tale,” Bacchilega puts forth that part of that role is to challenge the ideas of the East that perpetuate Orientalism from the Western perspective. The novel succeeds in an effort to contribute: “to contesting an exoticized image or fantasy of India” (Bacchilega 181).

Not everyone agrees that *The Mistress of Spices* actually contests exoticizing, however. In her book about feminisms, diasporas, and neoliberalisms in a framework of social and cultural theory, Inderpal Grewal presents a chapter titled “Becoming American: The Novel and the Diaspora.” The chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the role of diasporic literature in cosmopolitan American society, and is focused on three Indian English novels: *In an Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh; *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee; and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Early in the chapter, Grewal asserts that Divakaruni’s novel “participated in this transnational circulation of knowledge of Asian women, but it did so to exoticize and romanticize the

notion of ‘tradition’” (39). Grewal goes on to identify the presence of the ‘old’ in the novel as India and the ‘new’ in the novel as America (78). She goes on to effectively place *The Mistress of Spices* squarely in connection with the American “consumer culture and its search for the exotic” (Grewal 76).

While Grewal’s positions the ‘exoticizing’ that she contends happens in the novel juxtaposed with consumerism, Anita Mannur recognizes that not all critics see it that way. In her book *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, Mannur points out that some critics have challenged *The Mistress of Spices*, postulating a potential presence and perpetuation of Orientalism in Divakaruni’s representation of spices which renders them exotic, and sensual, and Eastern (93). In fact, Mannur claims: “Because of its overtly self-exoticizing terms routed through the culinary imaginary approximates the style of food pornography, the novel is frequently omitted in Asian American literary studies and discussions of Indian American literature” (89). However, Mannur also contends that this evaluation of the exotic within the novel is somewhat singular in focus and is not a complete representation of the novel as a whole. It is instead arguable that Divakaruni uses such ‘Orientalism’ to “position spices... as magical palliatives that counter the effects of racism and social inequity” (Mannur 95). Mannur concludes with an assessment that, “critics, perhaps hastily, overlook the novel’s well-intentioned attempt to negotiate complexities” (118).

Another scholar who examines the presence of food in *The Mistress of Spices* is Wilfried Raussert. In his article “Minority Discourses, Foodways, and Aspects of Gender: Contemporary Writings by Asian-American Women,” Raussert asserts that to Divakaruni, “the whole question of what it means to be a woman is aligned with the



question of what it means to be Asian American” (186). Furthermore: “Food transactions and responses to foodways in Asian American women’s texts function as important commentary on various ways of establishing multiple feminine identities” (Raussert 186). Specifically, in *The Mistress of Spices*, Raussert identifies many ways in which Divakaruni “resorts to food as a trope for redefining female identities” (195). Raussert agrees with Mannur’s assertion that the use of spices is actually a way of incorporating Orientalism in order to challenge it. He asserts that Divakaruni is actually “subverting stereotypical representations of Asian American women in an Oriental tale” and is “critical toward all forms of authoritarian power” (Raussert 198). By doing so, Raussert believes Divakaruni is simultaneously exploring the depiction of Indian-American women and the way in which they respond to relationships of power. He also asserts that she “breaks through the simple binary opposition of colonizer and colonized in her gendered discourse of immigrant experience” (Raussert 199). In her carefully crafted narrative, Raussert believes that Divakaruni achieves something which much of diasporic literature is attempting: “[Asian American] women writers provide us with tropes on a narrative level that stimulate further critical investigation into the interrelation of discourses on minorities, gender, and globalization” (200). Because conversations are generated by examining literature, it is important that Divakaruni be read carefully.

In my own reading of Divakaruni, I found that identity is a commonly explored theme in her work in general. Representation of individual fractured identity issues (and subsequent definition of self) also becomes a thematic element powerfully present. More specifically in *The Mistress of Spices*, it is through fragmentation that Divakaruni often identifies struggles and illustrates trauma. Complex, fragmenting experiences of persons

in diaspora are powerfully present in the novel along with continual employment of fracturing in terms of structure, imagery, plot, language, and character.

The process of recognizing, interpreting, and resolving fractures also frequently becomes the site upon which female diasporic characters from the story ultimately find strength and empowerment. Within successful maneuvering of fragmentation, the women in diaspora in *The Mistress of Spices* are able to redefine their sense of self within their new environment on their own terms. Consequently, fractured identity issues are a compellingly important, often-present yet under-explored aspect of Divakaruni's fiction. *The Mistress of Spices* is a powerful example of fractured identity in Divakaruni's literature, therefore a close inspection of the novel is extraordinarily worthwhile.

## Chapter Two – Fracturization and Fractured Identity

Because of the profoundly deep impact of immigration, individuals experience a wide range of difficulties in relocation. Ideas about homeland, nationality, role, responsibility, desire, obligation, expectation, and perception are challenged when a person goes through the experience of moving from one country to another. Ranajit Guha asserts that “to be in a diaspora is already to be branded by the mark of distance” and as a result the immigrant becomes an outsider to his/her home country and also in his/her host country (155). Lack of cohesion in the lives of immigrants creates a place where an immigrant can no longer feel at home anywhere, and subsequently loses his/her sense of past, present, and future simultaneously. The immigrant who has left a home country has essentially “disowned” his/her history and the subsequent lack of a space in which to belong equates to “a loss of the world in which the migrant has had his own identity forged” (156). To compound that, often “[the migrant] has nothing to show... except that moment of absolute discontinuity” (Guha 157). So, in this complete state of loss and lack of belonging, the diaspora is a painful place to be.

In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhaba recognizes the change in narrative in the migrant population in contemporary times. Bhaba examines a process he calls a ‘worlding’ of literature and asserts: “Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature” (12). It therefore becomes

vitally important to literary analysis to recognize this new domain of literature and pay close attention to what is being produced.

Throughout *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights the conditions of primarily South Asian immigrants living in the United States. Christina Bacchilega asserts that “*Mistress of Spices* evokes the mystery of wonder as it applies to personal initiation and paths of immigration” (193). In the novel, Divakaruni explores poignant issues for members of the Indian-American immigrant community of San Francisco on both an individual and communal basis. The identity issues in *The Mistress of Spices* are many and varied, and Divakaruni provides a rich background for exploration of them. This exploration takes place on many levels and is evidenced through multiple literary elements including structure, exposition, character development, imagery, and figurative language.

*The Mistress of Spices* solidly fits within the ‘worlding’ to which Bhaba refers, while simultaneously assuming the unique perspective that Lisa Lau refers to: “The positionality of diasporic South Asian women writers can be understood to be a somewhat uneasy one as they simultaneously struggle to negotiate their identities and yet find themselves occupying a vantage point relative to those writing from within South Asia” (243). The perspective is unique and provides for an interesting position in which to observe and describe the challenges of immigrant life in America. Furthermore, because the negotiation of identity becomes a repeated element of literature written by women of diaspora, it becomes noteworthy to examine how and where it is exhibited in the stories.

Divakaruni does go further than just describing immigrant struggles however; she

also exposes central fractured identity issues in her cast of characters. In a way that enhances the commentary on the immigrant struggle, Divakaruni employs a literary technique of ‘fracturization’ in the novel that emphasizes difficulties by quite literally shattering everything. Contrary to the often-discussed binaries that occur in such trying circumstances (self/other, home/away, here/there), the landscape and characters in Divakaruni’s novel are split into many more than two pieces. In fact, splintering occurs repeatedly, creating a pervasive presence of fracturization throughout the novel.

In continuous use of such fracturization, the transformative effects of the journey and lives of immigrants are illustrated as painful and rending. The immigrants are torn apart on multiple levels. Physically, the characters’ bodies are effected in ways that break them into pieces, both literally and figuratively. Emotionally and mentally, immigration and subsequent resettling processes challenge a feeling of wholeness and functioning as healthy, fully-realized individuals. Language barriers cause excruciating multiplicity as well, as the very words that could potentially help shape and express the experience become confused and often absent. Overall, the immigrant’s sense of self and personal identity becomes fractured at a crisis level.

One continual theme among characters and story-lines is the point at which the threshold of fracture is reached, creating a crisis level in identity formation. For some characters, the crisis is reached upon initial arrival and early living in the U.S., while for others it is reached when their level of fracturization coincides with other character fragmentation. Either way, it is a phase that is worthy of examination, as that is often the site upon which the literature is based. Instead of jumping directly to what Guha calls the “firm ground where the migrant, washed and fed and admitted already to his new

community, awaits assimilation,” it is valuable to examine the fracturization closely (157). Guha asserts that it is important to “continue a little longer with our concern for the impasse in which, literally, [the migrant] finds himself: stranded between a world left behind and another” (157). Much of diasporic literature, including this novel, focuses on the struggles and the challenges to adjust to immigrant life in America, so Guha’s advice can easily be applied to literary study.

Furthermore, since the fragmentation is so extensive, how the characters maneuver within their fractured state becomes important to examine. Reconciliation of a fractured state is extremely significant as in the novel, it often coincides with either successful or failed resolution of broader personal and social immigration issues. Whether or not characters and/or the community will effectively be able to resolve or negotiate their individual and collective fractured identities is crucial. Within the reflection on resolution, the condition of the immigrant is potentially moved beyond crisis and into a new realm of identity and existence.

Because of the close correlation of the multiple literary elements to so many kinds of fragmentation, an analysis is necessary to establish the overriding theme of fracturization and fractured identity in the novel. A thorough inspection of text structure provides insight into fracturing in terms of the novel’s framework, including structure and setting. Furthermore, fracture become most evident when the characters of the story are examined in three specific aspects – body, language, and sense of self. Careful textual and character analysis reveals that fracturization is evident throughout the novel and continually serves to illustrate the identity crises experienced by a multitude of Divakaruni’s characters.

## **Text Analysis**

### *Segmented Structure*

In an overall sense, the structure of the novel lends itself to a reading that indicates fracturization. There are fifteen chapters covering just over three hundred pages, so no chapter is extraordinarily comprehensive and shifts are frequent. The chapters are sometimes short, sometimes long and are often broken up multiple times. For example, Chapters 1 and 3 (“Tilo” and “Cinnamon” respectively) are less than ten pages long, while Chapters 10 and 11 (“Neem” and “Red Chili”) are over thirty pages in length. Within the majority of chapters, there is a breakdown into multiple segments. The average number of segments within a chapter is roughly five to six. Some segments within a chapter may only be a paragraph or two long before there is another visible line break in the text. The segments are then further broken up into sub-segments, which consist of anywhere between a single paragraph and multiple pages. The number of sub-segments varies: Chapter 13, “Lotus Root,” has four segments and roughly 2-3 sub-segments in each; Chapter 5, “Asafetida,” has six segments and only two of those are broken into sub-segments; Chapter 10, “Neem,” has the most sub-segments in a single segment – a notable nine. Because of the complicated nature of breaking the novel down into multiple chapters, with many segments, and a remarkable number of sub-segments, the novel has an overall feeling of fragmentation.

Within each chapter, the sentence structure Divakaruni employs is sporadic and unpredictable as well. There is often a sentence fragment of just a few words followed by a long, flowery sentence: “The fire of Shampati. Ever since we came to the island we had heard the whispers, seen stamped on the lintels and doorposts of the motherhouse the

runes of the bird rising, its flame-beak angled toward sky” (Divakaruni 59). At times, she does not even allow sentences to finish. For example, a mother reflecting on her son’s change in behavior wonders, “Could he be taking –” (Divakaruni 80). Internal dialogue and self-reflection also occurs quite often – especially from the narrator, Tilo – which Divakaruni offsets by the use of parentheses and italics: “And (O foolish woman-thought) I have nothing to wear. / *What of Haroun* says the thorn-voice” (197). The varied sentence structure, especially in conjunction with the fragmented structure, provides a textual feeling of pieces of text. Those chunks often disrupt any impression of instantaneous cohesion, and instead require the reader to maneuver elements that feel pieced together. The requirement of involvement draws the reader into engagement and mirrors the experience of fragmentation within scene, theme, character, and setting.

### *Shifting Setting*

The primary setting of the novel is the store that Tilo runs in San Francisco. Whole chapters occur within the walls of the store. However, early in the novel other settings are presented. Many of the thoughts, memories, and reflections of the narrator also contribute to shifts in setting. The setting changes constantly, as Tilo goes back and forth in terms of time and place – from past to present, in and out of environments. There are early flashbacks to Tilo’s village of birth and the island on which she became a Mistress of Spices. Susana Vega-Gonzalez asserts that the inclusion of the island “constitutes a metaphor of nurturing ancestral connections and a preserved cultural redoubt” (3). One powerful example of the incorporation of the island as a setting without a character actually visiting it in the novel’s real time is when Tilo thinks back to her journey from the island to America in a section of Chapter 4, “Fenugreek.”



Divakaruni doesn't actually change the setting to the island, but instead frames it in Tilo thinking back: "If you ask me how long I lived on the island, I cannot tell you..." (54). At the end of the section before remembering the island, Tilo is in the store. At the end of that section, Tilo is again in the store. Therefore, although the actual setting of the chapter has not technically changed, another setting is revealed through remembrance.

Divakaruni's also employs multiple settings without shifting a character's physical setting in Chapter 5, "Asafetida," where Tilo dreams of the island. In the dream, conversation and interplay between herself and the Old One is portrayed. Although the rest of the chapter occurs within the spice shop, by employing the technique of Tilo dreaming, a glimpse is given into the consequences for Mistresses who step out of the confines of expected behavior. Contrary to the actual setting of scenes, which primarily remains the store throughout the first several chapters, Tilo's mind offers the readers images of other settings.

Setting is further fragmented and exhibited in the way that Divakaruni gives Tilo the ability to have 'visions' of things that are happening to other people in other places, often asynchronously from the action of the text. According to Gita Rajan, the inclusion of magic realism "aestheticizes and braids together matter-of-fact daily events with fantastic elements, the real with the unreal, and myth with human experience" (216). Additionally, Vega-Gonzalez says that *The Mistress of Spices* ventures into the "world of magic, myth, and fantasy amidst the realism of their daily existence in the 'patchwork quilt' that constitutes the United States of America" and acknowledges the author's "intention to transcend consciously the established boundaries of the real" (2). Divakaruni often uses mystical elements in her novel to not just incorporate the 'unreal'

but to further illustrate a simultaneous disconnect and conjunction of reality and fantasy. Most importantly, this infusion of such magical and mystical ‘powers’ of the main character is a skillful use of magic realism in conjunction with fracturization to provide readers access to more than just the primary setting in which Tilo is initially confined. Having such access enhances the fragmented feeling of the text, the plot, and the characters.

For example, in Chapter 4, “Fenugreek,” Tilo lays down to sleep for the night and is able to envision life outside the store. Her visions give her access to a variety of lives: young men on the street, a woman in her kitchen, the anger of tired and frustrated men, and a young girl who is unsatisfied with her difference from others. All of these people share one quality – they are immigrant depictions. “When I lie down,” Tilo narrates, “from every direction the city will pulse its pain and fear and impatient love into me” (Divakaruni 63). She is able to access their activities as well as their thoughts, allowing them to flow into her and sometimes having the power to consciously reject them when they leave her unsettled: “They curdle my heart. I push back their thoughts into the dark that spawned them, but I know that invisible does not mean gone” (Divakaruni 63). Allowing Tilo access to the homes and activities of various people gives another change in setting that is not based on actually placing the action of the novel in another physical location.

Later in the novel the reflections, visions, and dreams continue to play a part in indicating other settings, but it is minimized. Instead, Tilo also actually ventures out into the city and the setting is subsequently physically changed. Multiple physical settings are provided starting in Chapter 7, “Ginger,” and continuing up through the end of the novel.

According to Vega-Gonzalez, “the spice ginger represents the hinge between India and America, the last and first taste of [Tilo’s] dual selfhood” (4). As the ‘hinge’ as Vega-Gonzalez called it is stretched thin by Tilo’s incorporation into life in America, she becomes more fragile in the text. Venturing out to various destinations is forbidden for a Mistress of Spices, and it is a painful, wrenching experience for Tilo. Interestingly, the more frequent the visits out of the store, the closer Tilo becomes to resolution of fracturization. Breaking up the chapters into multiple scenes – either physically or conceptually – provides a backdrop for images of growth, development, and the difficulty presented in the kinds of fragmenting obvious in the text.

Because of the complexity in terms of novel structure, sentence construction, and setting, the overall effect is that the text feels uneven as Divakaruni employs unpredictable chapter design, provides varied sentence style, and bounces between multiple times and places. While such irregularities do initially have a negative effect on a novel’s cohesiveness, in *The Mistress of Spices* the jagged structure lends itself to application of fracturization as a theme. The structure feels as powerfully fragmented as the characters within the pages: “The sequence of events too is non-linear, chaotic, and episodic, and thereby makes real the turbulent human experience of the various characters” (Rajan 218). Similarly, the splintered feel provides a basis on which the novel will ultimately build resolution by showing opportunities for characters to negotiate and/or heal the fracturing.

### **Character Analysis**

#### *Splintered Bodies*

Some of the most powerful examples of fracturization for characters occur in physical trauma experienced. Haroun, for example, is a character that is introduced early in the novel and the many elements of his fragmented character become a repeated focus. Tilo feels protective and worried about Haroun in a way she cannot quite define, but from very early on she senses his good nature may be short lived: “O Haroun, I sent up a plea for you into the crackling air you left behind.... But there was a sudden explosion outside... It drowned out my prayer” (Divakaruni 29). Later when Tilo puts a hand on Haroun’s new taxicab, she is overwhelmed with a vision of disturbing physical damage to Haroun, in which she sees someone slumped against a steering wheel; in reflection, she asks herself “the skin is it broken-bruised, or only a shadow falling?” As Haroun leaves, Tilo observes him as “silhouetted against a night which opens around him like jaws” (117). His body appears to her in this way almost as though she can sense an immediate danger of physical damage. The many uses of fragmented imagery in this scene illustrate the continuing fracturization that Haroun experiences and set the stage for future fracture.

Further development of the fragmentation of Haroun involves him actually being physically assaulted and robbed. As Tilo waits for him outside of his home, she is anxious; the description is again full of fracturization, referring to footsteps “splintering pavement” and sirens “drilling through the bones of [Tilo’s] skull in corkscrew motion” followed by images of the “shatter of brown glass” (Divakaruni 242). When Haroun finally stumbles up to his apartment, his body is crumpled and bloody as a result of the attack. The doctor who attends to him says it “looks like they used an iron rod. Skull could have cracked like snail shells” (Divakaruni 244). Haroun’s experiences offer multiple illustrations of fragmentation; it is undeniable that one of the most powerful

moments of fracture is the physical violence to his body. It is also remarkable that Haroun is experiencing such fracturization because of his status as a character who is a rather new immigrant to the United States. The presentation of fracturization in the descriptions and experiences of Haroun are a powerful illustration of the way in which Indian-Americans often experience a shattering of their former selves.

One of the most disturbing and painful scenes in the novel is likewise fraught with the physical fracturing of another Indian-American person. The words used to describe the attack on Mohan are heavy with references to things being broken, fractured, splintered, and fragmented. As his attackers approach, Mohan “hears the steps, fall leaves breaking under boots, a sound like crushed glass” (Divakaruni 179). The two men who attack him are skinheads, and the attack is definitely racially motivated as they slur out “Sonofabitch Indian, shoulda stayed in your own goddamn country” (Divakaruni 180). As he is being beaten, Mohan experiences such excruciating pain that Divakaruni describes it “like hammers breaking” (181). He cannot even wrap his mind around the horrific way he is breaking apart; he tries to defend himself “even though it hurts to breathe and a small jagged thought – *ribs?* – spins up for a moment into the lighted part of his mind” (Divakaruni 180). At one point experiences “a blow to the head so hard that his thoughts splinter into yellow stars” (Divakaruni 181). Disjointed reflections like this provide further illustration of fracturization of the text while also indicating just how deep the physical fracturing affects the individual character. Throughout the scene, Mohan’s attack is described in simile, metaphor, and other figurative language that constantly evoke fracturing. Due to the profound level of trauma, Mohan’s experience leaves him fractured in multiple ways even beyond the split he’s already experiencing as

an immigrant Indian-American. This fragmentation is significant as it illustrates the way in which his identity is becoming fractured as a result of the trauma he is experiencing in his immigrant life.

Mohan is not the only character that experiences shattering on a physical level. Although Lalita experiences sustained trauma over a period of time, she too is fractured physically. When she first comes into the store, Tilo feels from her a desire for life to be different but even more powerfully recognizes that Lalita is in physical pain from injury. The physical abuse that is inflicted on Lalita at the hands of her husband, Ahuja, is apparent immediately and the body continues to be a powerful example of the fracturing that Lalita experiences. Lalita's body is abused to the point of actual fracture: "He started shaking me so hard I could hear the bones in my neck make snapping sounds" (Divakaruni 286). Many of the women in the shelter Lalita is staying in experienced horrific abuse as well, and one she writes "had her skull fractured with a wrench" (Divakaruni 288). The body is a mode in which Divakaruni is able to powerfully illustrate the level of fracture that occurs with characters in the story.

Finally, the narrator herself is a powerful example of fracturization on the body. During various stages of her journey, Tilo is acutely aware of strain, stress, and pain upon her physical body. At the beginning of her experiences, Tilo is thrown off the ship on which she is traveling with pirates and launched into the sea: "And the plunge that would follow, the shattering of my matchstick body to smithereens, the bones flying free as foam" (Divakaruni 22). As she is thrust into the next leg of her journey, Tilo is physically fractured before she is saved. The fracturization is present in the language

used to describe the process by which she moves from one stage of development to the next.

While Tilo is still on the island, preparing to depart, the First Mother who has trained Tilo warns the young Mistress of the danger of her desires: “Tilo shining but flawed, diamond with a crack running through it, which thrown into the cauldron of America may shatter asunder” (Divakaruni 86). To travel to America, Tilo must travel through Shampati’s fire, but the Mistresses know they won’t feel pain from the experience. In further warning, however, the First Mother warns Tilo that if she breaks the rules, she will be recalled and the second journey through the flames is not painless: “Shampati’s fire blazes for her once more. But this time entering she feels it fully, scorch and sear, the razors of flame cutting her flesh to strips. Screaming, she smells her bones shatter, skin bubble and burst” (Divakaruni 59). Consistently throughout the warnings that are given to Tilo prior to her transport to America, images of physical fracturing are present. There is a kind of fragility of the human body that is constantly present when Tilo recognizes the risk of the life path she has chosen.

When Tilo does arrive as a Mistress of Spices in America, she finds that she no longer bears the skin or appearance of the young woman she once was. Instead, her body is now that of an old woman, and she is acutely aware of the sense of physically inhabiting a body that has not always been hers. People see her as the old woman she appears to be, but she acknowledges their inability to see the true her: “They do not know, of course. That I am not old, that this seeming-body I took on in Shampati’s fire when I vowed to become a Mistress is not mine.... The eyes which alone are my own” (Divakaruni 5). Tilo is split physically right from the beginning, as she starts her life in

America literally inhabiting a body which is not the one she previously occupied.

Wilfried Raussert asserts that the dual-body situation is a metaphor for the enclosure her character experiences (196). She is fractured, and trapped within that fracture simultaneously.

Tilo's fracturing continues as she begins to break out of the confines of the rules that have been given to her for her life as a Mistress. Ready to travel to help a patron, Tilo reflects on the way in which her body has served as a shell to protect her and the cost of splintering that protection: "[W]hen I woke in this land the store was already around me, its hard, protective shell.... And that other shell, my aged body pressing its wrinkles into me.... Today I plan to stretch my wings, to crack perhaps these shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the outside world" (Divakaruni 133). The fracturing in this instance represents a physical aspect of fracturization for Tilo, as she breaks out of the body that has served as a shell.

The physical body is the primary assertion of identity, both in appearance and action. A person is usually judged first and foremost on what they look like – tall, short, thin, fat, light-skinned, dark-skinned. For immigrants, the experience of physical difference can be multiplied as they often have different ethnic features that many of their American counterparts. Furthermore, as evidenced repeatedly, aggression and prejudice is often acted out in acts of violence against the body. In each instance in *The Mistress of Spices* where the body is involved, Divakaruni skillfully employs fracturization as a way of emphasizing the potentially horrific effects of diaspora on the physical condition of the immigrant. Since she paints so many pictures of fractured bodies, and the body is



established as a powerfully significant element of identity, such representations carry great strength.

When their bodies are fractured, characters in the novel try to express themselves in a variety of ways. As Divakaruni's immigrant characters struggle, they try to communicate experiences, feelings, concerns, needs, etc. In that process, language becomes yet another site for fracturization. Difficulties with language expression combined with a multitude of language barriers often create challenges, prevent effective articulation, and/or block healthy interpersonal interaction within the diasporic community.

### *Fragmented Language*

Many immigrants moving to the United States from South Asian countries have some experience speaking English and are educated in the language. However, sometimes they don't have a background in the language. Also, immigrants often come from areas where multiple languages are spoken simultaneously and English is added as yet another element of their multilingual knowledge base. As a result of language barriers, elements of adjustment to America can be challenging for immigrants on multiple levels. Not only do diasporic people not always speak English very well at first, sometimes they don't even speak the same language as others of their immigrant community. In an article by Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, among the most important "criteria through which Indians fortified their identity in the host societies," language is listed first. Because of the way communication and language is featured as fractured in *The Mistress of Spices*, it is worthy of investigation in terms of fracturization in the novel.

Saturdays, for example, are described as the busiest days for Tilo's shop, during which she hears everyone speaking together: "All these voices, Hindi Oriya Assamese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other..." (Divakaruni 81). There are so many different people and experiences and histories occurring in the store at any given point that they all exist together, and on top of each other. Despite their shared experience of immigration and new establishment in a host country, people also have multiple different primary languages. The way that language is portrayed in the novel in conjunction with the many languages existing simultaneously within the community reinforces the concept of fracturization. The struggles that immigrants experience with words further illustrate the concept of their existence in a world of multiplicity and fragmentation. Since "language forms an important aspect in the formation of ethnic identity in the diaspora," it becomes important to recognize how language is portrayed in *The Mistress of Spices* and how it contributes to the fracturization of characters.

In the second chapter, when Haroun goes into the store he shares his past with Tilo. Speaking of his life in India prior to immigrating to the U.S., he talks about a time when he, his father, and his grandfather gave boat rides to tourists on Dal Lake. As the story shifts from fond remembrances to a time when fighting broke out, Divakaruni describes his dialogue as "staccato words like chipped stone" (28). In attempting to describe his prior identity and his experiences in his country of birth, Haroun is plagued with the challenge of communicating effectively. By providing the stark contrast of his old and new self/life, Divakaruni successfully portrays fragmentation in Haroun based on his struggles with words and articulation.

Likewise, when Lalita opens up to Tilo and exposes her dissatisfaction and sadness with her life, which Divakaruni writes in images of fracturing: “Then she says in a broken voice, “O mataji, I’m so unhappy” (Divakaruni 103). As Lalita shares her story, Divakaruni refers to it as “the words spilling as over the broken lip of a dam” (107). When Ahuja (Lalita’s husband) yells at her, the dialogue is portrayed as “words shattering like dishes swept up from the dinner table” (Divakaruni 16). Later, when Lalita writes to Tilo, the description of Ahuja abusing her is full of language that attest to splintering and shattering on a physical level.

At one point, words even fail Lalita altogether, as she is speaking to Tilo. “She falls silent” and cannot verbalize the level to which the abuse has become pervasive in her marriage (Divakaruni 105). Tilo questions her about whether or not she could tell anyone about the abuse, but Lalita clearly does not have an outlet for her story. Divakaruni writes of the loss of words that Lalita experiences: “Silence and tears, silence and tears, all the way to America” (107). Lalita is a character who struggles with her individual identity throughout the novel, and when even her words are full of fracturization, it becomes evident that her experiences have a fragmenting effect on her in multiple ways.

Immigrants relating their experiences is not the only way that the novel highlights fracturization in language, however. Americans that are inflicting violence on characters of the immigrant population also use words that lend themselves to a recognition of fracturization. As Tilo seeks a vision of what happened to Haroun, for example, she actually hears the assailant say “C’mon blood, time to split man” (Divakaruni 248). Quite literally, the men who assaulted Haroun recognize the act that they are committing

will split him, and verbalize it. While the immigrants are at a loss for words or struggle with communicating their experience (thus adding to their fragmentation), the Americans inflicting violence are able to find words that often add to the presence of fracturization in the novel overall.

Another powerful example that illustrates the relevance of language in the text is during the conflict between Geeta and her father following the exposure of her relationship with a young Latino man. When her father finds out that she has moved in with her new love, he literally stops speaking to her. The silence that ensues rips the family apart, and Geeta's grandfather is unable to reconcile them. When he goes to Tilo and seeks guidance, Tilo concocts a mix that she claims will give the grandfather the power of "golden" speech for a short period of time. Whatever he says "people must believe," Tilo tells him (Divakaruni 190). There is a price to be paid, however; Geeta's grandfather will experience horrible, painful cramps as a result of the concoction. It is a price he is more than willing to pay to try to rectify the rift in their family. By highlighting a situation in which language becomes the site on which a divide is formed within a family, Divakaruni shows once again just how powerful language is. Furthermore, positioning that language struggle on a division incorporates fracturization yet again into the novel as a powerful way of illustrating just how painful the challenges are for her characters.

### *Splintered Sense of Self*

In Divakaruni's novel, individual issues are apparent as the characters engage in moments of self-identification during their immigrant experience. Gita Rijan points out that Divakaruni's characters "are not fully fleshed out; it is their hopes, desires, and pain

that makes them recognizable as typical diasporic, exilic, marginalized, damaged figures” (219). The characters are many and varied, but one thing the majority of them share is an immigrant status. There is a great deal of exposition and description in the novel, especially in terms of how various characters arrived in California and how the diaspora has affected them. According to Elizabeth Softky, the (most prevalent) setting of the San Francisco Bay area is significant, in the fact that a large percentage of the population of Indian immigrants in the U.S. reside there (26). Furthermore, Softky asserts that Tilo is the “quintessential immigrant” and represents the kind of struggles that most immigrants experience, including trying to balance their heritage and life in the new host country (26). However, it is not just Tilo that is analyzed in the novel in terms of division; other characters also are indicative of fractured identity.

When Haroun explains some of unrealized expectations about life in America, Tilo reassures him: “Great things will happen to you in this new land, this America” (28). Shortly thereafter, Haroun visits the store again to show off his new cab to Tilo. He has gone from being a servant for a wealthy family to being a taxi driver for a man from his uncle’s village (who has also recently immigrated). According to Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey’s study, nearly 80% of the men in their study, all of whom had immigrated from India to America, were working in service jobs. Nearly half of them were cab drivers (88). All of the participants of the study reported that “they had not anticipated how hard they would have to work to pay for rent, food, and clothing” (Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey 88). Expectations of what America is going to be like and the reality of life in the U.S. nearly never meet, and Haroun is a great example of how the sense of separation is compounded during an immigrant’s first years. Haroun is

represented as multiple identities at once – the Indian boat driver, the American cab driver, the clean man, the religious man, the hard-working man, the injured man, the helpless man, the victim. By providing exposition on Haroun’s past and showing him as representative of the immigrant experience, Divakaruni skillfully illuminates painful, fractured identity in a character.

Multiple other immigrant characters also come into contact with Tilo and there are varying levels of adjustment to life in America. Sarah Johnson writes that Divakaruni’s “rich array of characters includes Indian Americans who... are in transition and struggling for a sense of their true identity” (20). Some, like the bougainvillea girls are the embodiment of American youth inside young Indian bodies who have combined “silky salwaars” and “Calvin Klein jeans” and whose “bodies glow saffron in bed” (Divakaruni 52). Others like the little girl Tilo accessed when receiving visions one night dreams of some way to hide her Indian appearance. While she loves the Indian food her mother makes, and enjoys the sense of family in her home, she also wishes for a life of blonde-haired Barbie dolls where there is no Indian heritage present. She daydreams of how she might be truly ‘American’ some day: “Barbie with waist so narrow and hair so gold and most of all skin so white, and yes, even though I know I shouldn’t, I must be proud like Mother says to be Indian, I wish for that American skin that American hair those blue blue American eyes so that no one will stare at me except to say WOW” (Divakaruni 66). Homi Bhaba declares that the question of identity is “always poised uncertainly, tenebrously, between shadow and substance” and that the image of self and subsequent self-consciousness is “at once refracted and transparent” (49).

The concept of how people are perceived by both themselves and each other is a fundamental element of identity formation. To further examine elements of self-identity in terms of perception, it is important to look at the work of Jacques Lacan, especially in terms of his exploration of identity formation. In his writing on the 'mirror-stage,' Lacan asserted that between six and eighteen months of age, a child "sees its own reflection in the mirror and begins to conceive of itself... as separate from the rest of the world" (Barry 109). It has been asserted that this moment of identification is actually the birth of the 'self,' but because of the separation of the image and the actual physical being (inside/outside, self/other) this moment of identification is fraught with a sense of fracture. Clearly, "the mirror stage is a decisive moment; not only does the self issue from the mirror stage, but so does [*le corps morcelé*], 'the body in bits and pieces'" (Gallop 121). In light of Lacan's mirror-stage concepts and the ways in which it has been incorporated into diasporic literature, the concept of a fractured identity is a valid and important element of identity formation discussion.

Lacan's mirror-stage is also applicable to Divakaruni's text specifically, as the image of a mirror is explored repeatedly. Tilo is forbidden to see herself in a mirror, and even avoids her image in the reflection of the windows of the store at the beginning of the novel. However, as she continues to grow and change, she cannot control her desire to look in the mirror. She even purchases one and there is constant interaction and/or resistance of interaction with the mirror; she is at once excited about the potential in seeing herself, and also nervous about the consequences. Since it has been asserted that the mirror stage is a moment of recognition of self, Tilo's engagement with the mirror is of vital importance to the development of her character. She has great expectations of

interactions with the mirror: “Mirror, forbidden glass that I hope will tell me the secret of myself” (Divakaruni 151). Tilo not only wants to recognize herself in the mirror, but also longs for that Lacanian moment of identification in which she is able to identify herself as independent, autonomous, and self-realized. Breaking away from the expectations of her training as a mistress and asserting herself as a person who makes her own decisions will become a turning point in her own identity formation – almost as though she is ‘born’ into a new identity.

Bhaba also discusses the concept of self-reflection in *The Location of Culture*. He focuses in part on one familiar tenet of identity discussion, which is: “the philosophical tradition of identity as the process of self-reflection in the mirror of (human) nature” and asserts that “[I]n the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation... is confronted with its difference, its Other” (46). Bhaba goes on to assert that “What is so graphically enacted in the moment of colonial identification is the splitting of the subject” (46). Furthermore, it becomes noteworthy that what is seen ‘in the mirror’ is as important as what is not seen. In Tilo’s case, her appearance depicts one element of herself and the reality of her identity is a sharp contrast. While those that visit her store see a wise, old woman in conservative wraps, Tilo (and the reader) know that it is not her “true” appearance being portrayed. The containment of old/new body is representative of what she sees, what she does not see, what others see, and what others do not see. The unique element of the way in which Divakaruni employs the mirror concept is noteworthy because she empowers Tilo to make decisions regarding how much ‘seeing’ ultimately happens.



Such a profound interaction with mirrors is crucial not just to recognize Tilo's struggle as a character, but as an overall challenge of diasporic authors as evidenced in their literature. Salman Rushdie admitted the challenge when he wrote: "it maybe that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (qtd. in Lau 242). The representation of identity issues in the fracturization and mirror allegories in *The Mistress of Spices* (specifically Tilo's character) contributes to Bhaba's acknowledgement of its presence in literature: "The performance of the doubleness or splitting of the subject is enacted in the *writing*" (52). Divakaruni skillfully employs the mirror as a way of pointing out yet again the fractured identity issues caused by the immigrant experience.

While so many examples are evidence of fracturization and fractured identity throughout the novel, it is not enough to simply recognize that they are there. As characters, story-lines, and settings are fractured, it becomes most important to focus on how the fractures are negotiated and/or ultimately resolved. Only by examining what is done with the fractures is a close analysis really helpful in establishing why they are present.

### Chapter 3 – Negotiation of Fracture

Once the level of fracturization in the novel is recognized, it becomes intensely important to investigate how such fragmentation is navigated by the characters. The presence of fracturing is only one element of identifying the influence on identity formation. In an article about South Asian women writers, Lisa Lau states that “identity is one of the most common themes in their literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful, and only occasionally rewarding” (252). Multiple characters in Divakaruni’s novel are shown to be fractured which has a deep affect on their identities. In this chapter, a close examination of the characters is done in terms of their ability to negotiate their fractured identity issues; some are able to heal while others are not, and some are only able to reach resolution with the assistance of others. As Homi Bhaba wrote, “... a range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking” (172). Furthermore, the relevance of gender to identity negotiation is explored in this chapter. Divakaruni appears to be challenging traditional gender roles and expectations for both men and women, specifically in terms of their reaction to fracturization and fractured identity issues. Finally, this chapter will examine how Divakaruni highlights the success of women and illustrates powerful examples of successful identity negotiation within the diasporic South Asian female population.

In his article “Home and Away: Diasporas, Developments and Displacements in a Globalising World,” Pablo Shiaditya Bose asserts that “the range of diasporic transnational practices is not monolithic but instead by governed by differences,” specifically listing gender as one of the primary distinctions. Often, the success level of characters in *The Mistress of Spices* is specifically gender-based; the men and the women experience fracturization and resolution in very different ways. Scholars who examine immigrant lives and experiences agree in general that “gender is a central organizing principle of migrant life, that transnational migration affects men and women differently” (DeWind, et al 568). Margaret Abraham points out that while stress and difficulties are common to most diasporic experiences, “immigrant women of color experience some of the worst hardship” (197). Because of the profound level of difficulty in the experiences, close inspection of how women are specifically affected by fracturization, as well as how they negotiate it, is of paramount importance.

In *Women Crossing Boundaries*, Oliva Espín emphasizes the “need to reconceptualize how we view women immigrants by expanding our understanding of what migration entails for women” and realize the strength of “personal narrative to understand the psychology of migration from women’s perspective” (10). South Asian women are in a unique position in terms of diaspora that places them at the forefront of fracturization. Their roles in the household, in society, and individually are often vastly different in the United States than they were in their country of origin. There were certain expectations placed upon them in their origin societies in terms of behavior (dress, education, domestic role, etc) which may or may not be encouraged in the United States. Olivia Espín points out that immigrants have struggles including “feelings of rejection

from the new society, which affect self-esteem and may lead to alienation; confusion in terms of role expectations, values, and identity” (19). While in that state of upheaval, there are also many different influences telling immigrant women how they should exist.

Espín asserts that “identities expected and permitted in the home culture are frequently no longer expected or permitted in the host society” (20). Modern America is full of messages about autonomous self-realization, and often supportive of women to pursue their own goals, desires, and individual happiness. Admittedly, those messages are not necessarily universal: they do not always apply to women of color, or women of different socioeconomic classes, or women of diaspora (just to list a few subsets). However, they are likely to be different than what South Asian immigrant women were exposed to in their countries of origin: “What is appropriate behavior for women in the host culture may be unclear and confusing for the immigrant” (Espín 23). Often American society encourages change for women, but opportunities for immigrant women are sometimes incredibly difficult to identify and/or embrace even when they do exist. Not only do such conflicting messages present challenges in terms of how others perceive and treat South Asian women in diaspora, but also in how they identify themselves.

Simultaneously, the people (men and other women) in immigrant communities are sometimes more comfortable with women maintaining prior expected behaviors. There is comfort in the familiar, especially at a time of great change. Furthermore, “immigrants may become entrenched in traditional social and sex-role norms to defend against strong pressures to acculturate. Here, the home culture becomes idealized. Its values, characters, and customs become symbolic of the stability of personal identity” (Espín 23). When the more traditional behaviors are incorporated into the immigrant’s

life, it can serve to protect them from the pain of fracturization or identity confusion in their new environment. All of these examples of issues experienced by immigrant women show how complicated identity issues are following relocation. Many different levels of input in combination with many different personal experiences can cause unbelievable stress on women of diaspora.

Christina Bacchilega asserts that “there is one unmistakably clear message that concerns gender politics emerging from this novel, and that is the liberating effect of women’s solidarity” (188). That is certainly an assertion that can be supported by evidence in Divakaruni’s text. However, that does not portray Divakaruni’s gender presentations of her characters fully or completely. On one hand, Bacchilega has a very valid point; Divakaruni does offer empowerment to women of diaspora on various levels, including solidarity with other women and acknowledgment of the supportive, healing role women often play (individually and communally). On the other hand, Divakaruni also challenges traditional gender-biased expectations of South Asian men. This indicates she is questioning multiple assumptions based on gender, not just those that affect women.

Men from India who immigrate to America are expected to be strong and successful, dominating their work or study field and ultimately prevailing in a position to provide for their families both in America and in their country of origin. In a study titled “Preimmigration Beliefs of Life Success, Postimmigration Experiences, and Acculturative Stress: South Asian Immigrants in the United States,” a sample group was established consisting of educated, legal U.S. residents from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan who had voluntarily immigrated. According to the study: “Acquiring wealth

and higher status both within the Indian immigrant community and in the larger American society were reported as primary goals” (Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey 88). These measures of success are often relegated as duties to men. Therefore, it is important to remember that there are stressful expectations placed upon men in diaspora that are more commonly identified stressors to their specific gender.

The male characters in *The Mistress of Spices* experience profound fracturization and fractured identity issues, and achieve multiple levels of success or failure in light of their conditions. Some men are successful at negotiating the fractures; others are not. Many male characters in the novel who survive do so through dependence on others, specifically women. Some have to bend their more traditional expectations and behaviors and do things that are outside of their existing comfort zones, or pay a price for their inflexibility. None of these successful negotiation scenarios necessarily fit neatly into expectations of behaviors of traditional Indian men. The variety of successful and unsuccessful negotiation of fracturization for male characters does not appear to intend to negate them necessarily, but instead serves to challenge overall outcome expectations that are based primarily on gender.

Ultimately and perhaps most powerfully, Divakaruni provides a multi-layered site upon which the strength of women is highlighted. Not only do strong female characters in Divakaruni’s novel come to a point of independent, autonomous success but they also serve as support systems for the men in the novel. This emphasis on the resolution of fracturization by diasporic South Asian women provides a scenario in which they can be successful as women, as Indians, as Americans, as individuals, and as members of their new communities. The fractured identities grow exacerbated and reach a level of crisis,

but are not 'fixed.' Instead fracturization is successfully negotiated. The differentiation is key, because there is a significant difference between putting pieces together and creating a cohesive masterpiece. Instead of just surviving, Divakaruni's capable female characters are able to embrace the multiplicities within their identities and begin to incorporate the many elements of themselves into a fully realized and recognized person. Within that negotiation lies the powerfully hopeful message Divakaruni is able to impart to diasporic women: If anyone can do it, you can.

Therefore it becomes crucial in literary analysis of this novel not to just recognize the fracturization that is present, but also to investigate whether or not fracturing is resolved by whom, and how. Following the close analysis of the text and its characters, it is illuminating to examine the ways that multiple characters maneuver their fracturing experiences, specifically in terms of gender interactions and gender-based expectations. Despite assertions that Divakaruni is employing gender as a tool specifically to empower women, that is too simplistic; she is simultaneously challenging multiple gender-based assumptions about immigrants as a population and celebrating successful resolution of identity fracturization by women. Therefore, the emphasis of her presentation becomes primarily based on individual identity issues of the immigrant population, within which she is able to challenge gender issues and celebrate successes.

### **Males Maneuvering**

Men have often been featured as the main character in modern novels of travel and exploration of new worlds. Commonly, the man is European and is off on a grand adventure in a foreign land with a multitude of resources at his disposal. According to their textbook focusing on gender in a transnational world, Inderpal Grewal and Caren

Kaplan point out: “We have come to think of this male adventurer as the paramount traveler, overcoming adversity, seeking scenes and routes, and finding thrills in the adventure of travel” (383). However, as more men from postcolonial non-European countries have had opportunities to travel and relocate internationally, many of the stories could conceptually focus on their experiences. To some extent they have, but in much of modern literature, Grewal and Kaplan contend that “non-European males were presented as either fearsome monsters whose irrationality justified their destruction or feminized weaklings who needed masters” (383). The focus was not on the non-European male’s adventures or successes in a foreign land, but instead what purpose they served within the European ‘hero’ tale. However, as contemporary multicultural literature explores immigration on a greater scale, the story of the immigrant male has challenged concepts of racial stereotypes as well as gender-based expectations. Although often Divakaruni’s literature is read from a more woman-oriented feminist perspective because of the strong and empowering portrayals of women, she does engage in confronting male immigrant experiences in her writing as well.

According to Gail Bederman in her article “Remaking Manhood Through Race and ‘Civilization’,” there are premises positioned on gender that cause perpetuation of assumptions about how to ‘act like a man’: “Many contradictory ideas about manhood are available to explain what men are, how they ought to behave, and what sorts of powers and authorities they may claim, as men” (190). She goes on to assert that to study concepts of maleness is to “study the historical ways different ideologies about manhood develop, change, are combined, amended, contested” (Bederman 190). By examining postcolonial diasporic literature such as Divakaruni’s that include stories of South Asian-



American men, it becomes notable to mark ways in which expected behaviors of the population of immigrant men are challenged.

As noted earlier, Haroun is a male character who experiences fracturization culminating in the form of a terrifying physical attack. However, that is but one moment of a journey that the reader takes with Haroun. Regularly stopping in to share with Tilo, from stories of his childhood to the acquisition of his cab, readers are given a much more comprehensive view of Haroun as a character. Therefore, as Haroun becomes fragmented and subsequently attempts to navigate resolution, the process is complex and ultimately dependent on the people around him.

In one scene in the novel, Tilo prepares kalo jire seeds for Haroun's normal Tuesday pick-up and is heavy with feelings of foreboding. Divakaruni describes Tilo cutting the seeds for Haroun with a sharp knife, as she emphasizes the importance of the act: "I must press just right, split each seed exactly halfway down the middle" (113). The splitting of the seeds is an example of how the imagery in the novel lends itself to division and fragmentation, but even more significantly it is an indicator of the care-giver role that Tilo takes on in terms of Haroun. The act is also a foreshadowing of the challenges Haroun will face as the story unfolds, because Tilo slips and cuts herself while trying to split the seeds thus rendering their protective properties moot. When Haroun is attacked, the reader is further guided through the multiple elements of his character and the ways in which resolution of his fractured identity is (and will continue to be) extraordinarily painful and complicated, and will ultimately hinge on the support of others.

Following the attack, Tilo is present as they take Haroun into his apartment. As they enter, Tilo notices multiple indicators of his identity on the walls of his home, observing “whitewashed walls empty except two pictures hanging where his eyes would first fall on waking. A passage from the Koran in a lush curved Urdu script, and a silver Lamborghini” (Divakaruni 243). Tilo is powerfully aware of the split desires in Haroun; he at once wants to maintain his connection to his religion and history, while at the same time embrace the more contemporary, materialistic desires typically portrayed as ‘American.’

As Tilo makes these observations, she also laments her inability to have been able to split the kalo jire seeds just right and focus on the safety she felt obligated to provide for Haroun. As a community care-giver, Tilo expects herself to be able to help those in her care maneuver the kinds of splits, dangers, and difficulties they may encounter. Furthermore, she believes it is her duty – a common expectation women place on themselves.

However, she also realizes there may be possible healing for Haroun. However, it is important to note that the potential for healing does not come from Haroun himself but instead from those around him. Specifically, a woman across the hall named Hameeda presents herself to assist Tilo immediately following the attack. The development of their relationship is portrayed by Tilo as increasing Haroun’s chance of recovery: “Hameeda who I hope will heal Haroun’s wounded life” (Divakaruni 245).

As Hameeda nurses Haroun back to health, it becomes apparent that her support indeed plays an integral role in his recovery. He is angry, he tells Tilo: “If I catch those bastard pigs, those shaitaans...” (Divakaruni 300). He is, however, also thankful for the

chance to recover: “But also I have been lucky.... And I have found such friends – like family they are,” a list in which he includes Hameeda first (300). In the end every thought Haroun shares with Tilo regarding the future includes Hameeda and their life together. Haroun realizes the role that Hameeda can play in taking care of him and embraces her encouragement to protect himself from the things that can cause him fracture and pain: “I have learned my foolishness. Hameeda too is scolding me” (Divakaruni 302). Ultimately Tilo gives a present of lotus root to them both, something for Hameeda to wear on the night of their *nikah* (marriage), and thus passes along the care-giving role permanently to Hameeda.

Haroun, it appears, will reconcile his fracturization: “Haroun who has so much to live for, for whom the immigrant dream has come true in a way he never thought” (Divakaruni 302). His successful negotiation is made possible because of the love and care and support of the women in his life. Through such an example, Divakaruni endorses the resolution of fracture for a male character, but also illustrates that the potential for success is increased when he is taken care of by a woman. This dependent relationship with women is an unlikely scenario in the face of traditional depictions of gender relationships for Indian-American immigrant couples. In resolving Haroun’s fracturization in this way, Divakaruni is simultaneously challenging the needs/expectations of men while validating the role of women as healers and support systems.

Mohan is another male character from India who experiences one of the most horrifying acts of violence, leaving him in pieces. During Mohan’s brief story there is a light of hope for Mohan’s successful navigation through the fracturization. For a

moment, it seems as though the love of a woman is going to be enough to help pull him through. Mohan's wife Veena is shown to be a very supportive woman, and Mohan is simultaneously shown to be dependent on her support. As Mohan recovers in the hospital, he wants his wife there all the time, even while acknowledging she needs to occasionally go home and rest: "Only wish Veena could be here, it would be nice to have someone's hand to hold on to when outside the sky turns inky purple like *that* night" (Divakaruni 181).

However, when Mohan hears that his attackers have been acquitted, he embodies his fracturization, smashing everything in the apartment and bringing "down the crutches, hard and shattering, on whatever he can reach" (Divakaruni 182). By having a character physically act out his fracturing on his environment, Divakaruni is providing yet another layer on the effect that fracturing experiences has on a person. Not only can fracture be inflicted upon a person's body, but it can also be inflicted by the person to his surroundings. When he finally snaps at his moment of fractured crisis, Mohan cannot hear Veena begging him to stop breaking everything in the apartment. He cannot hear her sobbing or going for help. His inability to hear her takes away the one potential support that was presented to assist successful navigation of the fracturization. In one sense, she saves him that day by having the neighbors physically restrain him from harming himself. But ultimately he is too broken by the experience to be 'saved' by himself, her, or the combination.

Finally, Mohan's voice even fails him: "[He] doesn't speak another word. Not then, not in the coming weeks, not in the Air India plane when neighbors finally pool together ticket money to send him and Veena back home, for what else is left from them

in this country” (Divakaruni 182). Here the language loss is powerfully portrayed as the final devastating effect that the fracturization has upon a character’s individual identity. Unable to reconcile his fractured identity, Mohan is even portrayed as unable to articulate his experiences. His body is broken; his language is lost. The damage is irreparable.

Mohan is so fractured that it is irreconcilable and he is forced to return to India. As Tilo reads the article about the attack in the paper, she is devastated and laments “O Mohan, broken in body broken in mind by America” (182). Mohan’s story is short and relatively sparse; readers do not receive as much information about him as they do about other characters such as Haroun. However, overall it is among the most powerful and memorable example of an immigrant male who is not able to recover from fracturization – America is literally able to beat him into defeat.

In exploration of a subset of the male immigration population, Divakaruni incorporates the story of young Jagjit into the novel. He is a second-generation Indian-American and therefore experiences very different levels of identity issues, although his are no less fractured than others. According to Oliva Espín, the issues realized by the immigrant community are not just relegated to first-generation immigrants: “Migration also produced psychological effects for the immigrants’ descendants beyond the obvious fact that the younger generation was born or grow into adulthood in the new country” (16). Many of the initial descriptions of Jagjit lend to pointing out the kinds of struggles he goes through as a young man: “Jagjit with his thin, frightened wrists who has trouble in school because he knows only Punjabi still. Jagjit whom the teacher has put in the last row next to the drooling boy... Jagjit who has learned his first English word. *Idiot. Idiot. Idiot*” (Divakaruni 40). As Tilo observes the boy, she wonders if he knows his name

means ‘world-conqueror’ and hopes that he can rise above the bullying, oppression, and mistreatment he is enduring. He is fractured, and he is only a child. She hopes for his future that he will find someone to support him emotionally: “someone who will you take you by the hand, who will run with you and laugh with you and say See this is America, it’s not so bad” (Divakaruni 42). There is hope for Jagjit while he simultaneously struggles with expectations that are placed on him as a child, as an Indian-American, and as a boy.

As he develops into a young man, his fracturization becomes more evident. When he visits the store as a young teenager, Tilo observes that Jagjit has become “so busy always fighting always putting on toughness like a second face” (Divakaruni 126). He becomes a powerful example of a male character who experiences a literal split of his body and his image. He appears to be a young man who is growing, but at the same time wears a mask to hide the pain he is feeling. His fractured identity issues become more pronounced as he starts hanging out with a questionable crowd of friends, who validate and protect him while also introducing him to life as a violent member of an exclusive ‘gang’ of friends. According to Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey’s study, “Parental expectations that are unrealistically high could further lead to significant acculturative stress, especially among immigrant Asian children who, contrary to the ‘model minority’ image, do not excel in school” (84). Jagjit is confronted with family members who expect him to behave differently, impose the stress of his father’s work on him, and question “*Hai* Jagjit is this why we brought you to Amreekah?” (Divakaruni 125). He has expectations on him as a young male Indian-American that cause him to become even

more fractured and seek inappropriate and dangerous connections to try to reconcile his fractured identity.

In a final desperate attempt to ‘save’ Jagjit from the dangerous path he has started down, Tilo gives him an envelope full of money with a note that reads “*For Jagjit my world conqueror, to start a new life over... Use power, don’t be used by it*” (Divakaruni 292). When she gives him the money, she also gives him the poster for the karate training Kwesi has advertised. She hopes that he will be able to move from a world of fighting for no reason into a disciplined art of self-control and concentration. It’s not a perfect plan, and she’s aware of it: “Jagjit who already knows that the way back is twice as long. Blockaded with steel blades where there were none before” (Divakaruni 293). There is a representation in this interaction of the fact that resolving fracturization is a painful process that can be just as difficult, if not more, than the process of splintering. However, the hope that was glimpsed when he was a young child is once again shown in his character’s growth and opportunity.

As with many of Divakaruni’s characters, the complete resolution of Jagjit’s fracturization is not drawn to conclusion. He is given a chance for resolution that will require the money from Tilo, the support of Kwesi, the balance that can only come from a supportive community. The reader is left not knowing exactly how it all turns out for Jagjit, but also being aware that there is potential for resolution. Divakaruni provides a way that Jagjit can step away from his path of danger and violence without having to lose his notion of manhood. However, to do so requires that he seek assistance and accept the help of a woman and others of his community. Therefore, the gender expectations of him are both challenged and accommodated in a way that speaks to the necessity of balance.

In other words, his fracturization may be possible if he can learn to negotiate his fractures in a way that encompasses his life simultaneously as an American and as an Indian and as a male. In light of his youth, the possibilities seem wide open and his future is left as bright because of the support those around him are capable of providing.

From one extreme to another, Divakaruni showcases the men of Geeta's family – her grandfather especially – as an example of older men with familial interactions whose ultimate success hinges on their ability to maneuver fracturization. Not only do their actions affect themselves, but simultaneously have an effect on those around them. While Jagjit juggles one kind of balance to try to negotiate his fracturization, Geeta's grandfather has to juggle completely different expectations and interactions in his own fracturization.

After his family immigrated to America, Geeta's grandfather was still in India. His son convinces him to join them in the U.S. saying “we are all here, what for you want to grow old so far from your own flesh and blood” (Divakaruni 87). There is an expectation that he should be with his family in his elder years, even if that means complete relocation to a strange land with which he is not familiar nor comfortable. When he arrives, he has to confront his granddaughter Geeta, and does not understand how she dresses, why she works (and so much), why she cuts her hair short, how much makeup she wears, or how she can justify buying a shiny, expensive new car. Nothing about her behavior meets his expectations of how a woman should behave. While the reader may feel sorry for Geeta to exist in such a world of confining expectations, it is also noteworthy that Divakaruni presents the grandfather's experience as fracturing to him. His own identity is torn apart by the way in which he sees his only granddaughter



conducting herself and the way in which his son and daughter-in-law do nothing to stop it. Although this kind of ‘antiquated’ thinking may be hard for a generation of contemporary American readers to wrap their minds around, it is indicative of a difficult element of adjustment for an elder male from India who immigrates to America.

The grandfather’s fracturization reaches a moment of crisis when he passes on an offer of an arranged marriage that is sent to him by an old friend (also an elder, but still in India). The two elder men are communicating on behalf of Geeta and the friend’s grand-nephew in order to arrange a marriage that is suitable to them both. This is the traditional course that such an arrangement would take in their country of origin, but in America it is not accepted. That is reflected in Geeta’s response when her father relays the message; she laughs: “Dad, she says, tell me you’re joking... 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” (Divakaruni 91). The grandfather is floored by her response and confronts her with questions of what is so wrong with living such a life. “You are losing your caste,” the grandfather accuses Geeta in an impassioned speech, “and putting blackest *kali* on our ancestors’ faces to marry a man who is not even a sahib, whose people are slum criminals and illegals” (Divakaruni 93). From his perspective, Geeta’s behavior is absolutely inexcusable and she is vaulting the entire family into humiliation through her actions. He is torn apart by the possibility of such behavior from his granddaughter.

As his fracturization becomes pronounced, Tilo observes: “His words are a dry, hopeless sound. Geeta’s grandfather slump-shouldered and shrunken. Overnight his clothes hang on him.... His voice has learned new tones. Hesitation, apology” (Divakaruni 95). Even more than his surprise and concern regarding Geeta’s behavior is

his awareness of the immediate effect the conflict is having on the entire family. They are all torn apart. As the eldest male in the family, it is his place to try to keep his family together. He would even like to see his son consider being more flexible and tries to place a photo of Geeta and her boyfriend where his son can see it, in an attempt to undo the 'male' reaction his son is having: "Maybe it will be a little easier to take off his proud man-face and be a father" (Divakaruni 189). Despite the attempt, he is unsuccessful as the fracture is exacerbated and he finds the photo with "a crack, silver-sharp as a launched spear, cutting the picture in two, separating Geeta from her Juan" (Divakaruni 189).

The grandfather is thought of as containing wisdom due to his age. He is expected to have authority to 'fix the problem' as the eldest male – the one who hands down the dictated course of action. Traditionally, he would have had the power and the ability to eliminate the issues by putting forth a dictum. However, in America, he is not in the same position but feels the same obligation. The fracturization has gone beyond the individual level and he feels the acute expectation of himself to be able to repair the damage.

Tilo serves as a facilitator of resolution in this character line. Geeta's grandfather goes into Tilo's store and is clearly distressed by the situation within his family. Like other characters who appeal to Tilo, he is not necessarily asking for help but Tilo identifies a need in him and seeks to assist in resolving the crisis. The grandfather is ultimately able to reconcile the family and reports to Tilo: "[E]veryone is being very happy and very careful... I am holding my tongue" (Divakaruni 182). Although Geeta's grandfather admits that she and her father will probably continue to have conflict, they

had all learned the importance of love and strength within the family unit. Therefore, he considered his job done. As the patriarch, he was able to negotiate his own issues while simultaneously assisting in the repair of the family's fracturization. The generational conflicts that were a direct result of the immigration struggles the family was experiencing were resolved through the efforts of the primary elder male in the family. In that way, the outcome was expected. However, that successful negotiation was not possible without the support of a female care-giver or the willingness to adapt on the part of the grandfather. By providing resolution in that framework, Divakaruni is able to challenge some of the gender-based presumptions and expectations while simultaneously endorsing hopeful outcomes for others in similar circumstances.

### **Women Negotiating**

While Grewal and Kaplan do spend time pointing out elements of non-European male representations and expectations in literature that are grossly misrepresentational, it is not long before they ask "Where are the women?" They answer quickly: "In the standard narratives, women either were waiting home to be discovered or rescued or remained at home, waiting for the hero's return. In this scenario, non-European women were either invisible or a dangerous element to be conquered" (Grewal and Kaplan 383). In terms of women represented in a world with more international mobilization, they assert that "the common and inaccurate perception of the immigrant or migrant depicts a man" (385). However, Grewal and Kaplan seek to adjust that perception, pointing out that women experience just as many, if not more, issues as their male counterparts: "Restrictions based on race, ethnicity, language, religion, class, and national origin continue to place some women at a greater disadvantage in their new homes" (386). In

her article, “Model Minority and Martial Violence: South Asian Immigrants in the United States,” Margaret Abraham supports that conclusion: “Although gender role stereotypes oppress women under patriarchy, ethnic minority women, especially recent immigrant women, experience multiple subordination based on their courses of action, strategies, distinctiveness of culture, and structural arrangements” (199). Divakaruni incorporates multiple female characters who have to address issues along the lines of these struggles in one way or another.

According to Phillipa Kafka, Divakaruni writes with “obvious compassion and full understanding for Indian women who go West” (26). Kafka further acknowledges that “the traumas some of them experience in the United States and the clashes with their kinfolk are caused by their obstinate cling to and vaunting of Indian traditions” (26). Divakaruni provides a powerful example of clashes with family in her portrayal of the conflict between Geeta and her father and grandfather. While Geeta’s grandfather was an example above of the ways in which male behaviors and expectations are challenged by Divakaruni, there is also a focus on Geeta as a female character who traverses struggles of identity and relationships in a way that is unique to her position as an Indian-American woman.

Unlike her parents or grandfather, Geeta has been raised in the United States and has become notably Americanized in many ways. While she is shown more sympathetically aware of the desires of her parents and grandfather than other Americanized female characters (such as the bougenvellia girls), Geeta is simultaneously unwilling to accept that she must live within the constraints of ‘the old ways.’ Clearly, the identity crisis she has reached in terms of becoming her own person in America

comes into direct conflict with the ideas and needs of the older (first) generation of immigrants in her family. As a highly successful woman, Geeta faces additional stressors: “Culturally based conflicts may develop in families as women try to reconcile the traditional gender roles of their home culture with the demands of participation in the new environment. This is particularly true for women who encounter greater access to paid employment” (Espín 22). In that clash, great unrest disrupts and the fracturization becomes painfully apparent as the family’s world is broken apart.

On an individual level, Geeta is initially portrayed as completely inflexible regarding her own autonomy and independence. She scoffs at her parents and grandfathers’ suggestion of an arranged marriage: “arranged marriages aren’t for me... When I marry I’ll choose my own husband” (Divakaruni 92). She downgrades the traditional Indian female role. She is dismissive of Tilo’s concerns and not interested in the love that Tilo expresses on behalf of her grandfather: “‘Love, hah.’ She spits out the sound like a sickness. ‘He doesn’t know what the word means. For [grandfather] the it’s all control. Control my parents, control me” (Divakaruni 143). Tilo hopes that Geeta will be able to find a resolution that allows her to be herself while straddling a balance between the ‘old’ ways of her family and the ‘new’ ways of her life in the United States: “Geeta whose name means sweet song, keep your patience your humor your zest for life.... Geeta who is India and America all mixed together into a new melody, be forgiving” (Divakaruni 90). In Divakaruni’s novel, Geeta becomes symbolic of the difficulty of the young successful immigrant woman to negotiate the fractures in her self in the face of modern American expectations and traditional Indian expectations.

Part of Geeta's success hinges on coordinating her family's expectations with her own desires. She loves her boyfriend Juan and refuses to back down when her family tells her it's not a good pairing. However, she does not move in with him following exposure of their relationship. "I didn't move in with Juan. I couldn't do that to Mom and Dad" she asserts, but then couples it with a recognition of the effect it would have on her/them, "Besides I knew it would be really bad for our relationship, what with me being so stressed and everything" (Divakaruni 144). The way that Divakaruni writes Geeta indicates that the young woman is attempting to find some common ground upon which she can prioritize herself and her relationship while also showing her parents at least some of the respect expected. According to Lisa Lau, "Most contemporary South Asian women writers write with a sense of attempting to make their individual voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations" (252). In *The Mistress of Spices*, through the example of Geeta, however, Divakaruni seems to be showing how balance between individual voice and long-standing expectations is the key to successfully negotiating identity issues. Beyond the desire to be heard is a need to find balance between the parts of themselves in the women characters of the novel: "From the contemporary writings of the diasporic South Asian women, it appears that South Asian women of diaspora feel the tug of loyalties and confusion of identities until they learn to balance dual-identities or double consciousness, and combine those into a certain equilibrium" (Lau 253). Therefore, Geeta's successful negotiation of her fracturization will only be possible if she is capable of finding a way to straddle the two worlds, and the multiple elements of fracture.

Tilo's involvement in the conflict in Geeta's family is supportive in terms of resolving the grandfather's individual fractured identity crisis and the overall family crisis. Of course, there is an effect on Geeta as well, which indicates that it is the support of a fellow woman that helps her to find a way to negotiate her own individual fracturization. However, because Tilo is an immigrant woman like Geeta, there is more of a feeling of support between women in their relationship. Geeta has moved in with a female friend, and accepts Tilo's help but only on her own conditions. Even when she reconciles with her father/family, it is in the face of at least some moderate acceptance of her life and her relationship: "Ramu says Well maybe you should ask your young man to come over for a visit. And Geeta very quiet says If you wish Daddy. Ramu says Mind you don't take this as permission, and Geeta says I know. And that's all. Each goes into their bedroom but smiling" (Divakaruni 282). Geeta, with the support of the women around her is able to negotiate her fracture without dependence on others but instead a bolster to her own individuality and a validation of her needs, desires, and goals. She is able to maintain her core self while simultaneously behaving in a way that provides room for incorporation of tradition and expectation from her family.

Lalita is a character who traverses one of the most poignantly portrayed challenges presented to a woman in the novel. Throughout much of the story, she is not even referred to as "Lalita" but instead is given the designation of "Ahuja's wife." As a statement of the concept of ownership of women by the men in their lives, Divakaruni does not initially have Tilo refer to Lalita as anything but a man's wife, or a father's daughter. However, Tilo does recognize very early on in the novel that the woman has another name: "Ahuja's wife of course has a name. Lalita. *La-li-ta*, three liquid

syllables perfect-suited to her soft beauty. I would like to call her by it, but how can I while she thinks of herself only as a wife” (Divakaruni 14). In this way, the impetus is placed on Lalita to come to a point of redefining herself and therefore allow others to identify her differently as well. “O Lalita who is not yet Lalita,” Tilo laments her inability to help the young woman, “but how unless you ready yourself, hold yourself open to the storm? How unless you ask?” (Divakaruni 16). Tilo acknowledges that it is a difficult process to open oneself to the storm, or upheaval, that is inherent in examining ones identity. However, she encourages Lalita to do so in order to become a fully independent, realized person free from the splintering that has become so ingrained in her life and her idea of self.

At the hands of her physically and emotionally abusive husband, however, Lalita finds herself in the difficult position of having to step outside of culturally-ingrained expectations of behavior in order to fight for her own future. When she first admits to Tilo that she is in an abusive relationship, Lalita voices the difficulty of being an Indian woman in America and how she had hoped it would be different post-immigration: “I knew better, but still I hoped as women do. For what else is there for us? Here in America maybe we could start again, away from those eyes, those mouths always telling us how a man should act, what is a woman’s duty” (Divakaruni 107). The expectations of her home country about how a woman should behave and accept the dominance of her husband have put Lalita in a place where she believes that she has no choice but to accept the abuse. Although she had dreamed of life being something different, she has had no exposure to resources which can help her achieve a different life in America on her own.



Tilo acknowledges the struggles of Lalita in her thoughts: “Ahuja’s wife, you who are almost becoming Lalita, I too know what it is to be afraid” (Divakaruni 112). However, Tilo outwardly tells Lalita to not be afraid and says: “You deserve happiness. You deserve dignity. I will pray for that” (Divakaruni 111). In an empowering turn of events, Tilo inadvertently gives Lalita a magazine with a phone number for a women’s shelter. Although Tilo may not have known what she was doing at the time, it gave Lalita access to an American organization that can provide the kind of safety, security, and support she needs to take control of her damaged body and shattered life. She reaches her final breaking point – the ultimate moment of crisis in fracturization – when her husband attacks and rapes her. She attempts to resist, to deny him, and his attack only becomes more brutal: “He lunged forward, grabbed the front of my blouse and tore it. I can still hear the ripping sound, like it was my life” (Divakaruni 287). However, that was the moment that she reported also “broke [her] last hesitation” (287). When Lalita finally works up the courage to call, she is surprised by the woman who answers the phone at the hotline: “She was Indian like me, she understood a lot without my telling. She said I was right to call, they would help me if I was sure of what I wanted to do” (Divakaruni 288). Lalita packs her bags and heads meet two women who start her on her journey to safety away from her husband. In an encouraging turn of events, the formerly abused woman defies the odds and finds a way to move beyond her current situation and assert herself and her needs. The change in circumstances, which was originally encouraged and inadvertently facilitated by Tilo is now being moved further along by other women.

While Lalita's situation of abuse existed before she immigrated to the United States, it was not until she did that her fracturization reached a crisis point. The condition of fracture was exacerbated by exposure to the stressful elements associated with the immigration process. The stress and strain of immigration can bring other issues to the forefront, forcing identity issues at a level at which was not previously explored:

"Identity is subject to change throughout life. However, social forms of trauma, such as migration, shake its foundations like nothing else" (Espín 21). It is also because of her position as an immigrant woman, however, that she finds support systems in other women who are in similar situations. Within that solidarity, there is a strength exhibited by Lalita and the women around her that make her success in negotiating her fractured identity issues possible.

According to Ranajit Guha, the pain and anxiety concerning growth as an immigrant is a challenge that is painfully necessary to overcome in order to move forward. Guha points out, however, that often strength can be found in the difficult experiences of an immigrant if she can "mobilize the past as a fund of energies and resources... to clear a path which has the future with all its potentiality on its horizon. A difficult path opened up by the tragic disjunction of [her] past and present" (158). In other words, Lalita would likely not have had the opportunity to escape her abusive situation if she had not been in a position of solidarity with other women. So within the painful experience of immigration to the United States and the fracturing she experienced as a result of that immigration, Lalita is offered a path of healing and resolution.

That path is opened up through support that comes in the form of those that have directly shared her experiences – both as a woman and/or as a battered wife. They are

not people who are just trying to support the success of someone else's resolution in a removed way. Instead, they are women who are providing support from a position of their own resolved fractured identities. In her letter to Tilo later, Lalita admits that she is still struggling but Tilo decides Lalita is "coming at last into [her] own" (Divakaruni 289). This moment is one celebrated by Christina Bacchilega as "a powerful testimony of [Lalita's] rebirth" and "a transformation" (188). The individual strength of a woman in this situation is reinforced by a strong network of other women. Therefore, Lalita's story is not just a successful resolution of fractured identity issues, but a story with a gender-specific resolution. Her fracturization is resolved within her existence as a South Asian woman of diaspora, and is made possible with the encouragement and support of other women, specifically including other South Asian women of diaspora.

As the narrator and main character of the novel, the reader is exposed to more details about Tilottama than any other female character. Tilo's life is made up of contradictions which lead to fracturization in her character. Not only is she serving multiple roles to the people around her, but she is also torn in terms of her own self identity. There are rules that govern her life as a Mistress of Spices that seem to parallel the kinds of rules and expectations that govern the life of an Indian American woman. In order to satisfy the many expectations that are placed upon her as well as satisfy her own wants and needs, Tilo must learn how to maneuver the fracturing she experiences throughout the novel. She must live within the guidelines of her existence while simultaneously striving for successful negotiation of the fragmentation of her self.

For example, Tilo is restricted to occupying the store (by the rules of the island where she became a Mistress), and travels outside at risk to her personal safety and well-

being. Although at the beginning of the novel Tilo mostly observes the rule not to leave the store, she does attempt to cross boundaries of space by invoking visions. Because of the nature of her own personal desire, though (it is also forbidden to indulge her own wants), she is largely unsuccessfully and fragmented language is used to describe the results. When she tries to access images of Raven, for example, she cannot hold on to the mental pictures for long: “The images crumble, dust or dreaming, and are gone” (Divakaruni 76). After the images are shattered, she hears “a crash in the other room, like something breaking” and wonders, “[I]s it the night throwing itself against the store’s windowpanes?” Following her unsuccessful foray into the images, fracturing is used to describe the results: “[D]eep inside I feel the first tremor, warning of earthquakes to come” (Divakaruni 77). There is an acknowledgement of the fact that in order to negotiate her fracturization fully, Tilo will experience more fragmentation. However, she realizes the importance of going through more in order to eventually learn to reconcile the pieces. Even leaving the confines of her space – and thus expectations of behavior – is full of challenges.

The first time that Tilo leaves the store, it is to go out and see Haroun’s new taxicab, and she believes she hears the store’s disapproval: “Behind me a hiss like a shocked, indrawn breath” (Divakaruni 31). The second time she goes out, she acknowledges that it is getting easier but it is still painful to her to violate the space restrictions: “The first step wrenches, bone and blood, rips out our breath. The second too racks but already it is not so strong” (Divakaruni 135). The fracturing of the body again is presented due to the spaces that are maneuvered in passing from the store into the outside world. The conflict within Tilo is represented by the conflict of the outside

world versus the safety of her store, and is expressed in terms of fracturing on physical levels as well as in terms of space.

Tilo is also affected by the fracturization of those around her. When Mohan is attacked, for example, she comes across his story and feels torn apart by it. She reports that after she reads the newspaper article and has a vision of his attack, she feels fragmented: “O Mohan... I come back from your story in pieces” (Divakaruni 182). In this final chapter for Mohan, it is evident that not only he is fragmented by his experience, but that Tilo is affected as well. She is likewise affected by the experiences of Haroun, but she feels his fracturization even more powerfully because she is personally involved with him: “Haroun, who is a hurting inside me, whose name each time I say it pulls my chest in two” (Divakaruni 183). Tilo is a character that is not only fractured by what is going on inside her, or what has happened to her, but also because of the way she invests in others. By internalizing the fracturization of others in the community, she is further splintered and damaged.

When Tilo nears the point of being unable to reach resolution, Divakaruni once again employs mystical realism and writes in Tilo leaving her store as a condition of her role as a mistress of spices. Since she has been unable to abide by the rules of the role, Tilo realizes there will be consequences: “Shampati’s fire calling me back” (Divakaruni 247). However, she feels resistance within herself as the fracturization reaches a crisis during this time. She reflects on the characters who she tried to help, but who ultimately ended fractured on so many levels: “I think of Haroun’s face, and behind him Mohan with his blinded eye, and behind him all the others, a line of injustice that stretches beyond the edge of eternity” (Divakaruni 249). In a state of flux and conflict, Tilo is

chastised in her mind by the voice of the Mother: “Tilo, you should not have broken open the red jar –” (Divakaruni 250). Tilo responds to the voice by pointing out that there was no alternative based on how far the damage had gone, and points out “There *was* no other way... This land, these people, what they have become” (Divakaruni 250). The First Mother tells her that once upon a time she too had gone through the process and was “recalled” but survived it. At that moment, Tilo is being torn asunder by the conditions of herself and those around her, and is being advised that it is okay to not end up successful in her resolution – that it is okay to return to the island. Tilo, however, is reluctant to accept that as her own fate.

“Why am I wrenched at the thought that it will all be here, all except me” Tilo wonders as she prepares to return to her home away from the U.S. (Divakaruni 256). Parting with the store, with her community, with her newly established existence in America is painful for Tilo to contemplate. She does not want to leave, and realizes there is a “thought swimming up from the depths of consciousness.... Tilo what if you refuse” (Divakaruni 256). However, there does not appear to Tilo to be a choice, as it is an inevitability and she has no control over the outcome. She broke the rules, her self and those around her are fractured beyond repair, and thus she has failed. If she does not go on her own accord, she remembers the First Mother telling her that a mistress who has been called back will be taken by force if necessary: “Shampati’s fire opens its mouth and all around her are devoured by it” (Divakaruni 257). Not wanting to endanger those around her, Tilo tries to resign herself to her fate... but she does not accept it in her heart.

Yet another influence tries to lead her in another direction. Raven, whom she has admitted to caring for deeply, encourages her to run away with him: “Will you come

with me, Tilo? Will you help me find the earthly paradise?" (Divakaruni 270). In an attempt to get away from everything and everyone, Raven suggests that they go and find their way to their own happiness together. Initially, Tilo is inclined to want to accept Raven's offer and leave with him for yet another new life. The experiences she has had, watching so many people and lives being torn apart and being unable to 'fix' everything, have led Tilo to a point of desperation. This is not uncommon for immigrants as they find themselves in new and difficult environments, watching others around them struggle as well. The level of fracturization is so extensive that another place, another reality, another existence can hold great appeal, as it does for Tilo. However, yet again Tilo is hesitant; she finds she has difficulty accepting that running away with Raven is the outcome for her.

In the final chapters of the novel, Tilo nearly leaves: "My last day dawns heartbreaking-bright" (Divakaruni 279). Resigning herself to no longer being a part of the community, Tilo begins to say goodbye and sell off everything in the store. At this crucial point – where her successful resolution of her fracturization hangs in the balance – she receives something she has never received before. A letter arrives in the mail. When Tilo reads the letter from Lalita, she rejoices for the young woman's resolution of her own fractured identity: "Yes my Lalita, coming at last into your own, I am praying for you" (Divakaruni 289). While she is able to see hope for resolution for another woman, Tilo is still not able to see the potential for her own resolution. At this point in the novel, it is easy for the reader to see that resolution for her may not actually be possible.

Every element of Tilo's existence has become fractured, and all that remains for her is a "sliver of time" (Divakaruni 290). As she continues to try to wrap up the pieces

of her life in a package she can then leave, Tilo visits with various people such as Jagjit, Haroun, Raven to say goodbye. When she spends her last night with Raven, Tilo feels at the point of complete and utter shattering – “In my ears the blood beats an echo, *fragile, fragile*” – and cannot bring herself to be honest with Raven about her impending journey ‘back’ knowing she is “too cowardly to watch the truth shatter in his eyes” (Divakaruni 310). As she leaves him, she sends out a silent message to him, resigning her decision to an inability to make the idealism of the situation coincide with reality: “I do not expect you to understand.... Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it is to be Indian. To be American” (Divakaruni 311).

This is a powerful moment in the novel but not just because it is two lovers who appear to be losing one another. It is also a statement of the difficulty of putting together the fractured pieces of Tilo into something viable, successful. Her resolution seems impossible on the basis of just how deep the fracturing has extended. She is living in a world in which her Indian-ness and her American-ness are both challenged to the extent that she is left unable to reconcile the two – within herself and within her relationships and community. The immigrant situation comes to a head in this scene, and it seems all too likely that the fracturization of identity and condition that has been poignantly illustrated by Divakaruni will not be healed after all. After all, it wasn’t able to be resolved for other characters like Mohan, and he did leave.

However, Tilo – like Lalita – is portrayed quite differently than her male counterparts in the novel. The strength of the women comes through in their autonomous, independent actions that take control over their destiny and commit to resolving their fracturization.



The morning of her final day, Tilo wakes to the ultimate shattering experience. Her neighborhood is rocked by an earthquake and she wakes as “something flies through the air – is it the stone jar is it a slab of mirror – to shatter against my temple. Red stars explode in my skull” (Divakaruni 320). As Tilo’s identity has been so tied to the containers in which her spices were held (as her self too was contained) and the mirror in which she broke the rules in the most grievous way (as she observed her own identity changing), so is her moment of complete fracturization realized by the impact of her environment. As her internal and external fracturization reaches a crisis level, Tilo finally reaches a point where she will be truly able to make autonomous decisions to take control over her fractured identity. She is no longer controlled by the expectations of a Mistress of Spices. She is no longer relegated to one specific environment. Everything is broken, but everything is possible in the complete and utter breakdown.

As Tilo examines her physical condition, she finds that she is whole. For the first time in the entire novel, she feels physically like a complete woman, no longer two bodies containing one space: “This is not a body in youth’s first roseglow, but not one in age’s last unflowering either” (Divakaruni 325). There is nothing broken – no broken bones, no shattering sounds. The fracturization that has been pervasive throughout the novel is not present in a scene where it would so naturally fit. Raven is the one who points out all the fracturing around them: “There were big cracks slashed across the freeway, fissures with gases rising from them.... Buildings were burning, and every once in a while you could see glass explode” (Divakaruni 329). Tilo listens to the extensive shattering, but is relieved to find that she no longer feels fractured internally either: “I feel strangely weightless, my whole body a smile” (Divakaruni 330). She turns to

address Raven, to address her life, to address her future as they drive toward the only remaining structure – a bridge out of town.

As she begins to tell Raven why they cannot run away together, he stops her and begs her to wait and talk about it later: “In our special place these things will take care of themselves” he tells her (Divakaruni 330). Tilo adamantly rejects his resistance to the conversation: “‘No.’ My voice sounds ungracious, adamant. I wish I could acquiesce graciously, as women – Indian and not Indian – are asked so often to do. Kiss away conflict. But I know I am right not to” (330). She finds her strength. She finds her voice. And in that moment, Divakaruni presents it as something that is made possible because she is a woman.

As they prepare to cross out of Oakland forever, to travel to the paradise they have fantasized about, Tilo pauses to “stare north over the choppy water, its broken reflection of stars” and knows that beyond it lies the land Raven desires. However, she simultaneously knows it cannot exist for her. Tilo realizes that the fracturization that she has experienced – the rending apart of herself as an immigrant, as a woman, as an Indian-American person – is a part of who she is. And in order to find successful resolution of that condition, she must accept it and learn how to navigate within it. She tells Raven she cannot go with him and refers to the painful but necessary process of vocalizing the denial: “The words are crooked bones I must pull, bleeding, from my throat” (Divakaruni 335). Still, through the physical pain, she is able to articulate to Raven that: “[T]here is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make back there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug-dust, the young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and waking in cells. Yes, in

the hate in the fear” (Divakaruni 336). Gita Rajan asserts that “the sum of [Tilo’s] immigrant, diasporic, racialized, and gendered experiences in America make it possible for her to negotiate the outcome of events” (221).

Tilo has done her last bit of breaking – she has broken away from all expectations, rules, desires of others and finally in her moment of resolution found the ability to voice her own needs, and a willingness to build life within the fracturization. She is prepared to build her new sense of self on her own conditions: “Returning to the earthquake area, she demonstrates that she has integrated motherly instructions for social responsibility into her own dream of self-fulfillment” (Raussert 199). By taking on certain elements of her own desires, she does not have to negate the care-giving role nor her desire to be in a relationship but simultaneously can incorporate it into her own identity development. “Tilo does not want to renounce her human right to love and be loved,” writes Vega-González, and “At the end of the novel, Tilo’s dilemma is resolved happily” (5).

The last lines of the novel find Tilo’s resolution becoming whole as she decides it is time to take on a new name. Vega-González points out the importance of this final act, “an act which significantly represents the complexity of her identity” (6). The act of naming has been so important throughout Tilo’s life, but this time she tells Raven she wants a name that “spans both my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now” (Divakaruni 337). When he suggests Maya, she remembers that “in the old language it can mean many things” including “the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day” and asserts “I need a name like that, I who now have only myself to hold me up” (Divakaruni 338). According to Christina Bacchilega, “Maya is a name that

‘dissolves boundaries’” (188). Ultimately, Maya – who was Nayan Tara and Tilottama and a Mistress of Spices – reaches a point of resolution as a self-realized woman.

It is an ending made even more poignant because of the journey of fracturization Divakaruni has taken us on with her. González sees the power in the final chapter of Tilo’s negotiation of fracture in which she achieves a cohesion: “Like many other immigrants, Tilo’s identity is composed by an Indian part and an American part; it is, in other words, a ‘transnational hybridized identity’” (6).

Oliva Espín asserts that each person experiences the stresses of immigration differently, in complex ways: “The process of adaptation and acculturation is not linear. The multiple intrapsychic and behavioral changes required for successful acculturation occur at many levels. Individuals will experience these changes at their own unique paces” (21). Just like the characters in *The Mistress of Spices* the experience of South Asian immigrants cannot possibly be represented accurately without telling each of their stories. However, in Divakaruni’s attempt to present multiple different experiences combined with varying levels of negotiation of fractured identity issues, she paints a powerful portrait of a selection of South Asian immigrants. Within that portrayal, she is able to explore expectations based on individuality as well as gender, and ultimately is able to support the strength of women in diaspora.

## Conclusion

Fracturization and fractured identity issues are evident throughout *The Mistress of Spices*. Clearly the questions of who is fractured, how they are fractured, and how they ultimately negotiate the fractures are of paramount importance in analyzing the characters as well as the plot. Furthermore, the path of the experience of diaspora for the characters in the novel is worthy of inspection because of the fact that it so poignantly tells one narrative of a growing population of immigrants from South Asia to America.

As the numbers of people who immigrate grows, so does the need to understand and identify qualities of the experience. Through narratives, that becomes possible: “From the margins of modernity, at the insurmountable extremes of storytelling, we encounter the question of cultural difference as the perplexity of living and writing the nation” (Bhaba 161). The voice of the writers, their characters, and their stories overall becomes at least one representation of an experience.

It is important to remember that there is not a single unifying story that can represent an entire population, but at least through narrative a certain element is presented to those that may not encounter it otherwise. Taken as a snapshot, a narrative at least contributes to a portfolio.

This novel is also one snapshot of a portfolio of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s work. Other novels she has written, such as *Sister of my Heart* (1999) and *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005) could also be examined under a lens of identity issues, specifically fracturization and fractured identity. There are similar plot elements (struggle, displacement), imagery (language that is fractured), symbolism (mirrors) that

could all be inspected with the lens outlined in this thesis. In her most recent novel, *One Amazing Thing* (2010) there are multiple characters from different backgrounds all trapped in a passport office after an earthquake. Each character is damaged in various ways (fractured) and interacts with others in an attempt to negotiate their schisms. Simultaneously, the literal splitting of the earth reinforces the concept of fracturization in the environment of the novel. In just a cursory glance, many of Divakaruni's novels could be interesting subjects of a fracturization/fractured identity study.

Due to the possibility of discovery of experience and the repeated examples that are apparent in just a single author, this thesis has established a very valid and relevant perspective and awareness of fracturization and fractured identity in literature. As Homi Bhaba wrote, literary study and “performative structure” of a narrative can open up “a narrative strategy for the emergence and negotiation of those agencies of the marginal, minority, subaltern, or diasporic that incite us to think through – and beyond – theory” (181). Continued recognition of themes of fracturization and fractured identity in narratives is essential in order to validate the prevalence of the themes and the powerful way it affects the growth and development of characters.

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