

Research Article

## Women, Folk Belief, and Cultural Negotiation in the Select Contemporary South Asian Diasporic Fiction

**Nitika Wadhwa**

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, K.R. Mangalam University, Gurugram, Haryana, India;  
nitikachawla502@gmail.com

**Dr. Apoorva Hooda**

Assistant Professor (Senior Scale), Centre for Language Learning, The NorthCap University,  
Gurugram, Haryana, India;

Accepted version published on 5 April 2026

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19426083>

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the tensions between modern identity and folk culture in the South Asian Diaspora, as negotiated by the women protagonists in *Kavita Daswani's For Matrimonial Purposes* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Both novels feature women who live by the symbols of tradition, communal pressure, and demands of contemporary life, trying to build a sense of self in multicultural environments. The discussion examines the role of folk beliefs, rituals, and cultural codes, including marriage practices, in the construction of female subjectivity and in shaping their activity to seek autonomy. The paper will compare the realistic Matrimonial expectations portrayed by Daswani with the magical-realist version of cultural memory and healing portrayed by Divakaruni, to highlight the role of diaspora women in redefining tradition as an active structure rather than a control mechanism. The paper suggests that such narratives indicate the presence of hybrid identities created through a continuous negotiation between cultural origins and the modern desires of the time, thus part of the wider discourses about gender, displacement, and the formation of identities in diaspora writings.

**Keywords:** Modern identity; Folk culture; Diaspora; Communal pressure; Displacement

---

**Introduction**

The Indian diaspora literature is an outcome of historical migration, displacement, and resettlement, and it has a central focus on the conflict between cultural heritage and the modernity requirements of the new societies where people live. Indian diaspora writers frequently represent characters living in transnational places where cultural identity is not determined or fixed but is negotiated between boundaries, generations, and value systems (Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 222). Tradition here is associated with things passed down, including marriage customs, religious ceremonies, folklore, cuisine, language, and other regulations that, in a way, constitute cultural memory and emotional landmarks that migrants bring with them. Modernity, in its turn, is the pressure of Western individualism, gender equality, economic autonomy, and personal freedom, which tend to put a strain on the collective and patriarchal forms of the traditional Indian culture. The Indian diaspora narratives thus emerge as a space where traces of cultural continuity and the forces of assimilation and self-identification collide, creating hybrid identities that are both past and present. In this context, the literature of the Indian diaspora often predestines women's fate, casting them as the main carriers of tradition. However, they are also those who suffer the most under its influence. The case of the female protagonists is that they often bargain with arranged marriage, family demands, and social surveillance to achieve freedom, emotional gratification, and a sense of work identity in contemporary diasporic practices. Instead of opposing tradition and modernity as two mutually exclusive entities, diaspora authors demonstrate that these forces can interact and engage in dialogue through the adaptation of cultural practices, their reinterpretation, or their selective preservation. This dialogue represents what Homi Bhabha calls a third space of enunciation, in which new cultural meanings re-emerge through in-betweenness. In turn, Indian diaspora literature offers a subtle discussion of identity formation, allowing us to see how tradition can serve as a source of belonging and conflict in the contemporary world. Through this active interaction, diaspora stories have been important to postcolonial and feminist literary discourse, emphasizing the sophisticated ways in which cultural heritage and modern identity come together, clash, and ultimately remake each other in those transnational settings.

The role of folk culture in Indian diaspora literature is as a living archive of collective memory (Rushdie 10; Appadurai 6), which creates identity by mediating routine practices, beliefs, and symbols that migrants bring to new geographical and cultural frontiers. It also covers a broad range of inherited customs, including domestic rituals, marriage practices, food practices, oral narratives, healing practices, and social practices deeply ingrained in social life. Marriage rituals, especially arranged marriage and match-making arrangements, are seen as strong folk institutions that control the gender roles, the power of the family, and social membership, and at times, come under pressure when challenged by the contemporary ideals of romantic selection and personal freedom. Folk culture asserts its existence through these practices because it is a moral and social system that aims to preserve cultural authenticity among the diaspora. Spices, foodways, and oral cultural practices are equally important, as they

are carriers of cultural memory that convey the culture's sense and narrative. Spices, among other things, serve as a culinary ingredient, as well as the mark of ancestral wisdom, medicinal, and emotional nourishment, connecting the domestic realm with homeland culture. Oral traditions refer to the stories, myths, proverbs, and folk wisdom transmitted across generations and serve as informal pedagogical tools that convey values, gender roles, and communal ethics. Individual behavior is also influenced by community norms, which are enforced through collective observation and cultural surveillance, particularly for women, who are often put at the forefront to maintain cultural purity. Folk culture, therefore, is represented in diaspora narratives as both sustaining and limiting: it brings comfort, a sense of belonging, and identity, while at the same time imposing conformity and restraints on individual freedom. In literature, folk culture is not fixed and nostalgic but is portrayed as a negotiable and adaptive culture, continually redefined as modern contexts challenge it. In this light, folk culture emerges as an essential space where the issue of continuity and change among diaspora subjects is negotiated through the maintenance of cultural roots and the redefinition of these rituals in modern transnational environments.

In *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003) by Kavita Daswani and *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the two texts in question, are especially appropriate in a comparative study by virtue of the fact that both make their main characters out of foreground Indian women who would have to negotiate cultural tradition in a modern diasporic context, but through strikingly different modes of narration and symbolic structure. *For Matrimonial Purposes* is a realistic depiction of an Indian-American woman trying to live with the inflexibility of marriage arrangements, family demands, and community policing. The novel is set in the social context of the Indian diaspora in the United States, and it explores the role of matrimonial traditions and folk beliefs about marriage in maintaining cultural continuity, which controls women's decisions in the name of culture. The emotional pressures the community imposes on women to live in accordance with its ideals of decency are revealed by Daswani in her story, showing how folk customs relating to the institution of marriage are negotiated rather than inherited in the new, transnational world. *The Mistress of Spices*, in contrast, centers on the same issues through myth, magic realism, and allegorical symbolism. The main character, Tilo, in Divakaruni's work, possesses ancient folk wisdom in her mastery of spices, a symbol of healing, memory, and cultural wisdom that she brings with her to America as part of the diasporic realm. Although the novel departs from social realism, it remains deeply engaged with the emotional and cultural conflicts of immigrant life, especially the tension between the need to follow tradition and the urge to self-realization. This comparative reading of the two texts is motivated by the fact that, together, they demonstrate the complex ways in which folk culture can function in diaspora literature as both an ordinary social process and a symbolic, mythical power. Through the contrasting use of realism and symbolism by Daswani and Divakaruni, respectively, in portraying matrimonial traditions and folk healing, this research paper shows that the two literary techniques can effectively express a common theme of negotiating modern female identity without fully erasing culture. Their comparison, therefore, contributes to understanding how folk culture,

whether grounded in social realism or mythic imagination, continues to play a central role in the construction of diasporic women in the contemporary world.

The main research issue to be tackled in this work is the scant critical analysis of folk culture as a negotiating and dynamic element in Indian diaspora literature, especially in terms of women's identity formation in the contemporary transnational environment. Although the current literature on the narratives of the Indian diaspora has explored migration, hybridity, and gender in detail, folk culture has been discussed either as a fixed expression of tradition or as a repressive remnant of the past, in contrast to modernity. These kinds of readings do not pay sufficient attention to the subtle mechanisms through which rituals, marriage life, spices, oral traditions, and community norms actively shape the formation of diasporic subjectivities. This study thus aims at questioning the dichotomous understandings of tradition versus modernity through the analysis of folk culture as both a medium of continuity, emotional grounding, and restraint to women as they negotiate modern identities. The issue is how the diasporic women do not entirely discard folk traditions but, on the one hand, reinvent them, negotiating them in new cultural environments. With this in consideration, the main purpose of this research is to examine how *For Matrimonial Purposes* by Kavita Daswani and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, both reflect folk culture as a shifting cultural system in which the female characters assemble identity, agency, and belonging in the diaspora. The paper aims to comparatively analyze the various literary approaches of the two writers, such as social realism and mythic symbolism, towards the representation of the interrelation between folk traditions and modern aspirations. It also attempts to examine the gendered aspect of the folk culture and especially the position of women as seigneurs of tradition, as well as being the victims of its disciplinary authority. Placing such stories in the framework of feminism and diaspora theories, the study hopes to show that folk culture is neither entirely oppressive nor entirely liberating but is an intricate, changing environment that shapes and redefines the modern female identity. Finally, this paper leads to further insight into the way in which the literature of the Indian diaspora expresses cultural negotiation and questions oppressive interpretations of tradition, and emphasizes the role of women in the renegotiation of culture in the new conditions of transnationalism.

The key argument in this paper is that the identities of women negotiated in both *For Matrimonial Purposes* and *The Mistress of Spices* are not enacted as a denial of folk culture but as its selective transformation and redefinition in the context of the diaspora. Tradition and modernity in these novels do not exist as opposites; they are in an interactive relationship, in which women mediate past cultural practices with people's present desires. The main character of Daswani must navigate the forces of arranged marriage and family control, as well as societal demands, while seeking emotional independence and self-identification. Her involvement with matrimonial practices does not reflect passive submission but rather a constant negotiation in which tradition is challenged, fought, and molded as one sees fit. On the same note, Tilo by Divakaruni embodies primordial folk wisdom through spices and ritual knowledge. However, the plot of her journey reveals a conflict between cultural obligation and personal desire, suggesting that even deeply rooted traditions can change in

contemporary settings. Using such stories, folk culture is not depicted as a set of rules that cannot be broken, but rather as a dynamic cultural tool, which can be redesigned to suit evolving identities. The protagonists' negotiations show that modernity in the diaspora cannot entail the erasure of culture; it is a process of constructing hybrid identities that draw on cultural memory while accepting change. The women in both texts occupy the middle ground as they rebrand folk practices, whether in matrimonial or healing rituals, to establish agency and emotional truth. The analysis claims that this vision of modern identity formation is delicate, in which learning cultural roots is neither discarded nor unthinkingly retold but thoughtfully refracted to maintain a sense of belonging, self, and agency in transnational sites by foregrounding strategic interactions between women and folk culture.

### **Review of Literature**

The critical scholarship on Indian diaspora literature has consistently focused on identity formation as a complex, fluid, and negotiable process shaped by migration, displacement, and cultural interaction. Stuart Hall and other critics of postcolonialism during this early period viewed cultural identity not as an essential state of being, but as a positioning, constantly created by history, memory, and representation (Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 225). This has been a dominant approach to interpreting texts of the Indian diaspora, in which hybrid and transnational identity prevails over national or homeland-based identity. The theory of hybridity and the third space by Homi Bhabha also contributes to diaspora studies by explaining how migrant subjects create new cultural meanings in the in-between spaces that mediate between the cultures of their origins and the host societies they settle in. These conceptual frames have been widely used in writings on the Indian diaspora to describe the coexistence of cultural preservation and change in migrants' lives. In their works, Avtar Brah, Vijay Mishra, and Robin Cohen extend the topic by foreshadowing diaspora as a lived moment and a cultural process that encompasses themes of belonging, nostalgia, and homing desire. The idea of diaspora space introduced by Brah is particularly concerned with how gender, race, class, and ethnicity intersect to shape identity, which is why it is particularly applicable to women's narratives. Feminist critics have also opined that the identity formations of Indian diaspora women are uniquely gendered since the women tend to be overwhelmed with the need to uphold traditional cultural practices and meet the demands of the new cultural roles in the host country. Literary reviews of authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni can be used to examine how characters in their texts negotiate multiple cultural affiliations. That identity is a compromise and negotiation, not a resolution of such ambiguity. These critical writings, taken together, have defined Indian diaspora literature as a significant site for exploring the construction of identity through cultural negotiation, memory, and resistance, thereby providing a theoretical framework for analyzing the relationship between folk culture and modern identity in diasporic texts.

Folk culture has played an important role in postcolonial literature as a tool for reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems, cultural memory, and daily practices that existed on the margins of history during colonial rule. Folk traditions, most frequently

rituals, myths, oral stories, therapeutic practices, food practices, and common practices, are frequently used by postcolonial writers to challenge colonial epistemologies that elevated Western rationality and literary histories to the status of primary sources of knowledge, pushing aside local and lived experiences. In this way, by foregrounding folk culture, these authors criticize the uniformity of narratives of colonial modernity and affirm the usefulness of vernacular traditions as legitimate ways of knowing and expressing. Folk culture is therefore a counter-discursive means by which postcolonial literature re-centers peripheral voices and regains cultural continuity broken by the colonizers and later by globalization. Simultaneously, postcolonial literary criticism underscores that folk culture is not presented as stable and perfect but as active and disputed, especially in situations predetermined by migration and diaspora. According to scholars, folk traditions in postcolonial writings tend to foreground internal conflicts over caste, gender, and power, revealing how cultural practices can both recreate communities and generate social orders. Feminist postcolonial theorists also emphasize that women often signify the lineage of folk tradition, serving to maintain the authenticity of culture while trying to circumvent the forces of modernity and social transformation. Therefore, folk culture serves as a mediating force in postcolonial literature, in which characters reconstruct adopted practices in response to changing political, social, and cultural relationships.

Feminist approaches to Kavita Daswani and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni always prefigure how female authors explore issues of women's agency, the culture's gendering, and the emotional work required of women in their homelands and diasporas. Critics of the *For Matrimonial Purposes* have explored how the novel reveals the patriarchy that is ingrained in the arrangements of marriage, the power of the family, and the vigilance of the community on the Indian diaspora. Feminist theorists believe that Daswani not only shows marriage as a personal institution but also as a cultural machine that imposes discipline over women's bodies and desires as well as life choices, in the name of tradition and respectability. The protagonist's struggle is therefore interpreted as an allegory of the pressure of heightened gender expectations faced by diasporic women who must continue to maintain cultural continuity while seeking independence in contemporary social contexts. Feminist criticism highlights Daswani's realist narrative as especially successful in uncovering the absent yet daily moves of control that unfold through familial affections, emotional compulsion, and cultural guilt. Alternatively, feminist ways of seeing *The Mistress of Spices* by Divakaruni focus on the symbolic and mythical aspects of female power, desire, and selfhood. The master of spices, as discussed by the scholars, symbolized feminine wisdom and power rooted in folk tradition, making Tilo a healer and cultural interpreter among the immigrants. Feminist critics, however, also remember that this power is associated with strict codes of obedience and self-denial, which are manifested in how even a movement of empowering folk traditions would limit women's personal freedom. The fact that Tilo violates these rules, especially in his decision to love and to find individual desire, has been seen as a feminist statement of individuality over self-sacrificing demands on women. When Daswani and Divakaruni are read comparatively as feminists, one sees a common interest in women negotiating tradition rather than breaking it rebelliously.

Both writers portray women who defy patriarchal society's standards while remaining deeply engaged with cultural traditions, offering a nuanced feminist discourse that disrupts the dichotomy of oppression and liberation in diasporic literature.

Given the considerable mass of scholarly work on Indian diaspora literature, however, there is an evident critical disjuncture in the comparative analysis that not only prefigures folk culture but also serves as a tool of identity negotiation, rather than a traditional background or symbolic leftover of tradition. Much of the criticism has been based on more general themes, including migration, hybridity, assimilation, gender, and postcolonial identity, and folk elements, including rituals, marriage practices, spices, oral traditions, and community norms, have been treated as minor cultural indicators, instead of as forces in the construction of subjectivity. Folk culture is often presented as a denial of women's rights or a nostalgic evocation of the motherland, thereby reinforcing a binary contrast between tradition and modernity. These strategies tend to neglect how diasporic women intentionally reenact and negotiate folk practices in their daily lives. Moreover, although single works on Kavita Daswani and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have provided important insights into feminism and postcolonial readings, there are only a few comparative readings that place their works in dialogue with folk culture. Comparative studies in existence focus on narrative style, thematic issues of gender and migration, or symbolic versus realist representation, but fail to do so systematically to analyze how folk culture functions through these various modes as an ever-present yet continually flexible pattern of identity. This discontinuity impedes a deeper understanding of how similar cultural negotiations are expressed through the various literary strategies within the diaspora.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical approach of this paper will be based on postcolonial, cultural, and feminist theories of diaspora to explore the role of folk culture in mediating identity construction in diasporic spaces. The *For Matrimonial Purposes* by Kavita Daswani and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are stories of immigrant women who are trying to reconcile their preservation of traditional values with the demands of a new, western way of life. These works explain how folk practices (rituals, culinary traditions, marriage practices, and oral beliefs) function as cultural memory and sites of resistance, enabling women to experience identity renewal in transnationalism. In these novels, cultural negotiation can be traced back to the concepts of hybridity and the so-called Third Space by Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha 54). According to Bhabha, our personalities are shaped in a peripheral zone where cultures interact, provoke, and alter one another. In *For Matrimonial Purposes*, the role of arranged marriage is a kind of transitional zone between the values of traditional Indians and Western individualism, which is in tension and adaptation. On the same note, in the novel *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo is a bearer of ancient folk knowledge, which places her in a Third Space between myth and reality, tradition and modernity. His analysis is further supported by Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity as fluid and changing. Hall also denies the essentialist concepts of identity and perceives it as an ongoing process (Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" 2) that is framed by history, memory, and representation. In both

novels, women are depicted whose identities change as they shift across geographical and cultural borders. The women protagonists in Daswani's work face conflicting expectations of the family and the needs of an individual. In contrast, the characters in Divakaruni's work transform folk traditions to meet the needs of people and emotions in modern times. Feminist diaspora theory makes an important contribution to the gendered aspects of cultural orchestration. Diasporic women are frequently cast as carriers of tradition, as wives who have a duty to maintain the purity of culture through marriage, the household, and ethical behavior. In *For Matrimonial Purposes*, women's bodies and their decisions are also points of cultural control among immigrants. Contrarily, *The Mistress of Spices* reinvents folk culture as a tool of feminine empowerment, with the ancestral knowledge allowing women to heal, fight marginalization, and take charge. The stories reveal a combination of patriarchy and migration to aggravate the plight of women further. Lastly, the folk culture acts as cultural memory and resistance in the diasporic environment. Rituals, spices, myths, and oral traditions are symbolic connections to the homeland that provide emotional continuity amidst displacement. Simultaneously, these aspects do not allow erasing the culture by claiming indigenous knowledge systems as a part of Western modernity. Divakaruni uses magical realism to place folk practices as tools of change above the work of Daswani, who highlights the conflicting applicability of this in the modern life of immigrants.

#### **Folk Culture and Matrimonial Traditions for *Matrimonial Purposes***

In the *For Matrimonial Purposes*, Kavita Daswani preempts folk culture using the institution of arranged marriage as the core of the work, as a powerful means of perpetuating cultural identity among the Indian diaspora. The folk traditions in matrimonial practice, insofar as matchmaking with the help of family circles and the community, recommend caste-conscious alliances, which are entrenched in folk practices that control social behavior. The marriage in the novel is not just a personal one, but a ritual that is morally accepted by the culture (Daswani) and that guarantees the continuity of the tradition in a foreign country. By adopting such practices, the diaspora aims to find stability and familiarity, creating a sense of homeland values in a foreign West. The role of parental control in decisions that influence matrimony is significant in enhancing generational hierarchy and the propagation of culture. In culture, parents assume the custodial role, believing they have a duty to ensure their children are not subjected to cultural erosion. This power is even more strict in the diasporic environment because marriage is interpreted to protect against assimilation. The society also intensifies this pressure by scrutinizing decision-making and judgment, and reinforcing normative expectations. The concept of social approval is put forward, and the desires of the individual are often undermined by collective cultural honor, which presents folk traditions as tools of social control. These matrimonial expectations are gendered, as evidenced by the female protagonist's experience. Balancing the needs of her self-growth with the demands of culture, she cannot reconcile her thirst for autonomy with those of her community and family. Whereas male characters have the freedom to negotiate their relationships, women have to adjust, compromise, and safeguard cultural values by getting married. This is an unbalanced display of the way

the folk tradition overdisciplines the bodies of women and the choices of women, placing them in the role of cultural authenticity within the diasporic structure. Simultaneously, Daswani does not depict folk practices as completely oppressive. Traditions of matrimony also provide members of the community with a sense of belonging, identity, and cultural rootedness among women who are forced to deal with displacement. Through her involvement in the rituals, the protagonist does not lose touch with her background, despite doubting its limitations. Making folk culture, therefore, a paradox in the sense that it is both constraining and making identities. Through this tension, *For Matrimonial Purposes* emphasizes the multifaceted Nature of diasporic womanhood, where identity is achieved through negotiation rather than abandoning tradition.

### **Folk Healing, Spices, and Cultural Memory in *The Mistress of Spices***

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses spices in *The Mistress of Spices* as potent symbols of folk wisdom and ancestral knowledge (Divakaruni) and of Indian cultural traditions. Both the spices in Tilo's shop have historical, mythical, and healing connotations, symbolizing an intergenerational memory of women. These spices are not mere cooking ingredients but are used to represent native knowledge systems that defy the rationality and scientific superiority of the West (Chakrabarty 5; Said 25). Divakaruni predicts the presence of folk culture through his ritualistic use of spices as a living archive, which maintains emotional, spiritual, and cultural continuity in the diasporic space. Tilo becomes a cultural interpreter who helps bridge the divide between tradition and contemporary life in America. She lives and works in an ethnic enclave but is serving a multiethnic immigrant client. She is in a liminal space between old folk practices and new realities of the diaspora. Her position as a Mistress of Spices demands serious consideration of the tradition, which supports her in her role as its keeper. Meanwhile, her day-to-day communication with immigrant customers demonstrates the flexibility of folk culture, in which traditional healing methods are already being redefined to address new fears of loneliness, racial alienation, and cultural dislocation. One of the main conflicts of the novel arises from the tension between Tilo's magical folk responsibilities and her personal needs. Bound by the principles of her religious position, Tilo is denied her own freedom, emotional closeness, and love. Her growing emotional bond with Raven indicates a desire to be herself without adhering to cultural norms. This battle reflects the broader state of the diaspora, as women often feel conflicted between maintaining cultural beliefs and pursuing individual freedom. This conflict enables Divakaruni to challenge the price paid to preserve culture, which requires self-denial. The folk culture of *The Mistress of Spices* is therefore a source of empowerment and burden. Although ancient wisdom gives Tilo power, meaning, and spiritual authority, it also imposes boundaries that limit her originality. Folk healing gives women power by providing alternative avenues for agency rooted in tradition, but it also reinforces demands for sacrifice and obedience. Through various manifestations of this dichotomy, Divakaruni introduces folk culture as a multifaceted construct that enables people to struggle against cultural marginalization, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. The novel eventually recommends that the identity of diasporic negotiation is made, where empowerment and burden coexist within a cultural context.

---

**Negotiating Modern Identity: A Comparative Analysis**

Both *The Mistress of Spices* and *For Matrimonial Purposes* introduce female characters who negotiate their contemporary identities in diasporic contexts by refusing to be completely assimilated into Western culture. Instead of losing their cultural identity, the main characters preserve selective relationships to inherited values and traditions that ground their identity. The opposition to assimilation in Daswani's novel is imperceptible and grounded in common decisions about marriage, family demands, and social behavior. Conversely, the protagonist in Divakaruni does not succumb to assimilation by conforming to her ancestors' folk traditions, a representation that symbolizes cultural difference in American society. The identity in both stories is presented as a negotiation of identity rather than either tradition or modernity (Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 226; Bhabha 3). Notably, neither hero completely dismisses tradition; instead, they redefine it to fit their developing personalities. The female protagonist in Daswani does not challenge the essence of tradition but uses it to find emotional harmony and take control of her life. This redefinition indicates a practical approach to culture, in which tradition is adjusted to personal desires. In the same way, Tilo is reinterpreting her role as a Mistress of Spices, placing greater emphasis on human connection rather than strict ritual requirements. Her transformation indicates that folk culture can change its form without losing its cultural meaning, as she becomes someone who can be engaged with more personally. One of the major differences between the two texts lies in their narrative forms and symbolic approaches. Daswani uses domestic realism, in which identity negotiation takes place in familiar spaces such as home, community, and matrimony arrangements. This naturalistic description highlights how the cultural clash plays out in everyday life, even in the most banal experiences. Instead, Divakaruni employs a mythical symbolism and magical realism, externalizing inner battles through spices, rituals, and folklore. Whereas Daswani's realism highlights social constraints, Divakaruni's symbolism evokes the emotional and spiritual dimensions of identity formation, offering two distinct yet complementary images of being a diasporic woman. There is a gendered negotiation of identity in the novels that takes place in both private and public spaces. Women are faced with pressure in marriage, obedience, and emotional control in the domestic world, and cultural visibility, racial alienation, and social acceptance in the social world. The main character of Daswani negotiates their identity primarily within the family and community, where scrutiny is extremely high, and conformity is the norm. Tilo's negotiation is projected into the open air through her shop, which becomes a place of culture and struggle. The novels, in their combination, can be seen as the development of modern identities by diasporic women through constant negotiation across gendered, cultural, and spatial lines.

**Folk Culture as Constraint and Empowerment**

The concept of folk culture in diasporic literature has a paradoxical status, serving both as a means of limitation and as a force of empowerment. In *For Matrimonial Purposes* and *The Mistress of Spices*, folk traditions govern women's lives, prescribing values and norms for marriage, sexuality, duty, and cultural behavior. Such practices

impose dominance over women's bodies and decisions, making them the agents of cultural innocence and continuity. In the diasporic setting, this power is further aggravated where communities turn to women in order to maintain cultural authenticity amid perceived Western influence and cultural destruction. The control aspect of the folk culture is best evident in matrimonial rituals, household demands, and ethical standards. In *For Matrimonial Purposes*, Daswani limits the autonomy of females by using arranged marriage and surveillance in the community in order to push women into opting to please their family members rather than their own feelings. In the same way, in *The Mistress of Spices* by Divakaruni, the ancient folk rules govern Tilo's physical actions, her emotional life, and her love life. These stories demonstrate how folk traditions, despite their cultural preservation, tend to support the power as well as patriarchal structures that discipline the bodies of women and suppress the voices of individuality. Simultaneously, folk culture is a key element of emotional anchoring and cultural survival of diasporic women. There are rituals, spices, oral beliefs, and matrimonial customs that ensure continuity during displacement, thereby allowing women to maintain a sense of belonging in unfamiliar settings. Folk healing in *The Mistress of Spices* is a strength on its own as it supplies women with spiritual power and other sources of knowledge that counter Western marginalization. In *For Matrimonial Purposes*, marriage and family cultural practices, however limited, provide women with social recognition and cultural grounding within the immigrant community. It is through folk culture that emotional resilience is maintained, even though it is limited. More importantly, the folk culture described in the two texts is not fixed but dynamic. Traditions do not remain the same; they are continually redefined to suit the modern realities of the diaspora. This flexibility enables folk culture to act as a dynamic system in which contemporary identity is created. Demonstrating folk culture as simultaneously limiting and enabling, Daswani and Divakaruni dispute dichotomous exposure to tradition and modernity by proposing that the diasporic woman's identity is more about negotiation, resistance, and change than about inheritance.

### **Conclusion**

Such comparative analysis of *For Matrimonial Purposes* by Kavita Daswani and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has explored the functionality of folk culture as an essential location of negotiation in the process of creating a contemporary diasporic identity. Both texts, because of the difference in their narrative modes, Daswani with his domestic realism and Divakaruni with his mythic symbolism, display how Indian diasporic women work through the same issues of tension between the viewed inherited traditions and modern realities. As Daswani is predictive of matrimonial customs and community values, so is Divakaruni, but she adds folk healing and folk wisdom to her list, which provides a balanced view of how tradition is maintained and changed in the diasporic space. The paper confirms the new role of folk culture in defining diasporic identity, especially among women at the crossroads of cultural conservation and individual freedom. Marriage practices, rituals, spices, and oral beliefs are among the folk traditions that serve as stores of cultural memory, with an emotional permanence in times of displacement. These traditions do not simply act

as the dead remains of the past, but are, in fact, dynamic practices that respond to the succession of social, cultural, and geographical conditions. The two novels show that folk culture remains at the heart of the negotiation of belonging, otherness, and identity in contemporary diasporic existence. One of the most important findings of this research is women's agency in redefining tradition. Despite being constrained by patriarchal expectations, the folk practices and female protagonists are more than that because they engage in a process of cultural redefinition to gain independence and self-identification. In *For Matrimonial Purposes*, the women challenge and renegotiate matrimonial demands, whereas in *The Mistress of Spices*, matrimony is a form of folk knowledge that empowers and shapes moral conduct. The future research avenue is extensive. Future research can extend this study to other diasporic texts from diverse cultural and geographical locations to examine the diverse expressions of folk culture and identity. Further comparative studies of oral traditions, folklore, and storytelling practices would help clarify how cultural memory is passed between generations. Also, generational analyses of first- and second-generation diasporic women would provide further insight into changing interpretations of relationships with tradition, assimilation, and cultural inheritance. These explorations would continue to enrich knowledge of folk culture as an important, adaptive force in diasporic literature and identity construction.

**Author Contributions:** All authors have contributed equally to this work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### **Works cited**

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP, 2000.

Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2008.

Daswani, Kavita. *For Matrimonial Purposes*. Penguin Books India, 2003.

- 
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices*. Anchor Books, 1997.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–237.
- . "Who Needs 'Identity'?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, Sage Publications, 1996, pp. 1–17.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. Routledge, 2007.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. Grove Press, 1989.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*. Granta Books, 1991.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 1994.

---

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** *The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s). Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.*