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Disease and Creativity in the Diasporic City: A Gendered View on Two Atypical Transnational Novels

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Abstract: The topographical turn in literary and cultural studies has shed new light on the deeply symbolic significance of the natural and urban places where stories unfold. This focus on spatiality is particularly evident in the South Asian literature by contemporary women writers, where locations acquire a personality and significantly contribute to the shaping of gender identities. Although most of these narratives portray female protagonists who develop strategies of resistance and sisterhood within traditional domestic spaces, the widely praised transnational novels *Brick Lane* and *The Mistress of Spices* show that women can also achieve independence and self-realization in the bustling urban environment. Drawing on cultural geography as well as gender and social studies, this essay argues that the global dimension of the city offers diasporic women the opportunity to forge new empowered selves in the above-mentioned books. First, the article maintains that London and Oakland, CA, where the main characters live, exert a centripetal force on women, thus triggering change and mobility, both in physical and psychical terms. Second, it claims that the two cities are gendered “heterotopias”, i.e., heterogeneous spaces where border-crossing women, like those featured in the two novels at hand, can overcome alienation and develop creativity, resilience, and self-confidence. In conclusion, urban spaces serve as “safe houses” for immigrant women, where they can cure their emotional and physical diseases and become figures of adaptive hybridity.

Keywords: transnational women’s literature; South Asian diaspora; gendered spaces; *Brick Lane*; *The Mistress of Spices*



Citation: Cavalcanti, Sofia. 2024. Disease and Creativity in the Diasporic City: A Gendered View on Two Atypical Transnational Novels. *Humanities* 13: 88. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13030088>

Received: 4 April 2024
Revised: 5 June 2024
Accepted: 6 June 2024
Published: 10 June 2024



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1. Introduction

After being long considered as the description that interrupts the flow of temporality or the setting that functions as a static background for the plot, space in narrative poetics has recently acquired a new generative function. As Paul Newland underlines (Newland 2008), there has been a topographical turn in literary and cultural studies that has unveiled the link between geography and social constructions, places and ideologies, space, and imagination. In *Atlas of the European Novel* (Moretti 1998), Franco Moretti argues that the spatial trajectories of narrative not only establish linkages but also actively set the plot in motion. “Geography”, he claims, “is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history ‘happens,’ but an active force that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth” (ibid., p. 3). From this perspective, space is active, dynamic, and full. In recent years, the relational approach to space focused on the dynamic arrangements of living beings and social goods (Löw 2006) at the heart of the spatial turn and has triggered numerous studies of spaces and places that have been appropriated for cultural meaning. Narrative space, in particular, has increasingly come into focus as an important carrier of cultural meaning (Hallet and Neumann 2009). Thus, its analysis provides fresh insights into the mutually animating relationships among the environment and the characters who dwell within it. A growing consensus in literary studies suggests that static conceptualizations of space are inadequate for investigating the multiplicity of meanings and the socio-cultural references that spaces convey. Ingo Berensmeyer and Cristoph Ehland, for instance, in their edited volume, *Perspectives on Mobility* (Berensmeyer and Ehland 2013), point out the cultural

impact of mobility on the human experience and production of space by claiming that “literature reflects and processes the transformative force of movement on the perception of the world” (ibid., p. 13). Literary critic Robert T. Tally, Jr. (Tally 2014) also reflects on the emotional and cultural aspects of place in cultural productions, calling for an investigation of “literary cartographies”. As Gerhard van den Heever puts it, “literary cartographies illuminate how we come to ‘see’ a place as a result of its representation together with the possibilities of action built into the representation, which lays the groundwork for understanding ourselves in context as well as imagining possible avenues for social agency” (van den Heever 2018, pp. 17–18). By focusing on women’s movement through space in the diaspora, this article traces gendered cartographies that map a transition from traditional places of relegation and confinement to transnational sites of defiance and creativity, from a ghettoized condition to an inclusive form of citizenship.

In light of the current research on the physical, mental, and social dimension of spatiality, and considering that “desire, nostalgia, memory, hope, oppression and exile [are] all related to questions of space and place” (Le Juez and Richardson 2019, p. 9), this essay seeks to incorporate a gender perspective into the conception of space as a dynamic construct affecting the formation of identities. By claiming that women’s psychological liberation presupposes their physical exploration of unknown spaces, the essay suggests that the cityscape enables women to overcome their internalized notions of inferiority and assert their own identity within a typically male-dominated territory.

The urban space, as a complex “socio-cultural artifact” (Grosz 1995, p. 241), is a clear example of the conflation between factual and symbolic elements. Reflecting on the particular space of the city, David Harvey claims that “the city is somewhere where fact and imagination simply have to fuse” (Harvey 1990, p. 5), thus suggesting that its space goes beyond the mere physical and material dimension. In the same vein, James Donald adds a social and cultural perspective to the urban setting, arguing that “a city is a physical location that is imaginatively produced, experienced, and lived” (Donald 1999, p. 27). In this sense, Claude Lévi-Strauss’ definition of the city quite eloquently reflects the reciprocal formation of the urban landscape and its inhabitants: “A city is a social work of art, an interwoven structure produced by a collectivity” (Fishman 1977, p. 18). In other words, social history is embedded in the cityscape; the latter, in turn, informs social histories and individual behaviors, triggering the development of collective imagination. Rob Shields calls this spatialization of social and cultural histories “imaginary geography” (Shields 1991, p. 29) for its consideration of space-related metaphors and symbols. This dynamic perspective can be adopted for the re-visioning of space in narrative poetics. The critical analysis of space as a cultural site requires the exploration of spatial practices in specific contexts and “representations of space as sites imbued with symbolism and meaning” (Elden 2007, pp. 110–11). It is within this framework that this essay on textual representations of the diasporic city in the contemporary South Asian literature by women writers is positioned.

Over the last thirty years, the settings portrayed in South Asian female authors’ writings do not simply function as the static background upon which the narrative unfolds but acquire a personality of their own that contributes to the construction of gender (Cavalcanti 2023). In their anthology, *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature* (Lal and Kumar 2007), Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar analyze the physical and psychic dimensions of domestic settings, with a special focus on women’s attempts at building a space “of openness and creativity” (loc. 266) within their homes. Similarly, Geetanjali Singh Chanda’s work, *Indian Women in the House of Fiction* (Chanda 2008), explores the role that domestic space plays in the construction of Indianness and womanhood in the modern literature from the sub-continent. Although they promote empowering role models for women by emphasizing the subversive energy inherent in traditionally female places like the home, what these studies fail to acknowledge is that enacting forms of resistance from such restricted spaces does not provide a truly liberating alternative to women’s marginalized position. In other words, viewing the private sphere in a positive light

as a woman's domain (Richter 2005, p. 6), as a valid substitute for the public world of men, and as a catalyst for gender consciousness hardly contributes to increasing women's visibility and influence. A case in point is represented by the novel *Ladies' Coupé* (Nair 2001), which portrays the inner awakening of an Indian woman during her journey in a train compartment for women. Her liberation from the oppressive set of cultural norms that both society and her family sustained (Bausman 2014) occurs within the private space of the coupé thanks to a series of intimate conversations with other women passengers. Even though the gendered spatiality, where the protagonist's re-birth takes place, conveys a sense of shelter from the outer male world, a confining ideology of domesticity is still perpetuated. In a similar vein, Anita Rau Badami's diasporic novel *Tell It To The Trees* (Badami Rau 2011) portrays a woman's silent rebellion against her abusive husband through a series of subversive acts planned and enacted within the familiar space of her kitchen. Chanda considers this trend of narrating home in Indo-English women's novels an "attempt to change the structures from within" (Chanda 2008, p. 43). However, a very different way of looking at the idea of home—viewed less from a local than a transnational standpoint—and women's place in it can be observed in two atypical South Asian women's novels analyzed in this article.

While most of the research conducted so far has focused on the enfranchising potential of local and domestic spaces, where South Asian women's lives are mainly lived, this essay suggests that women's acts of resistance against the patriarchal order are more effective when psychical awakening is supported by physical expansion. In particular, the article argues that the city—namely the diasporic city—enables women to achieve a greater degree of autonomy and agency by displacing them from their traditional positions within the home and serving as a space where transgression and transformation are enacted through mobility and dynamic exchanges. To that end, two widely praised transnational novels will be examined, *Brick Lane* by the half-English and half-Bengali writer Monica Ali (Ali 2003) and *The Mistress of Spices* by the Indian-American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Divakaruni 1997), which not only depict female empowerment through cultural defiance and spatial transgression but also serve as counter-narratives that deviate from traditional storytelling that represent women as subjected to determined roles, values, and functions of femininity. Through a gendered analysis of women's movements within and across urban spaces, combining the principles of cultural geography and gender studies (Massey 1994), the essay argues that the transnational and transcultural experiences in a foreign land enable the female protagonists to develop a rebellious, dynamic, and imaginative subjectivity and enact "moments of civil disobedience [. . .]: signs of spectacular resistance" (Bhabha [1994] 2004, p. 172). By transcending local confines and embracing the global dimension of the city, the diasporic women protagonists forge new gendered identities and navigate the complexities of their hyphenated identities through mobility and creativity.

2. A Gendered Construction of Space

That gender intersects with space in multiple ways constitutes one of the feminist movement's core insights—from Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" (Woolf 1929) to recent critical discourses in gender studies (Narain and Gevirtz 2016). Numerous studies in social sciences have also argued that geography matters in the construction of gender. In her book, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Massey 1994), the sociologist and geographer Doreen Massey underlines that places deeply influence the cultural formation of genders and gender relations as is demonstrated, for instance, by the position occupied by women in different cultures. Their frequent relegation to the domestic sphere in patriarchal societies as well as the limitation of their mobility—both in terms of identity and space—is a source of discrimination that contributes to the construction of the female gender as weak and submissive. Looking at contemporary South Asian fiction, Geetanjali Chanda claims that "Indianness and womanhood [. . .] are informed by place" (Chanda 2008, p. 11), meaning that the spaces where women's lives are typically led, such as kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms, define their selves. Interestingly, the women protagonists of this kind of fiction

take advantage of the intimacy of restricted spaces and develop strategies of resistance and sisterhood within the domestic environment, thus opening a breach in a typically patriarchal structure (Dutta 2013)¹. Despite the intrinsically optimistic message of this narrative tendency, the female characters' condition of confinement suggests that the home continues to exercise a strong ideological power on women who fear the consequences of stepping out, such as shame and dishonor. Malashri Lal has termed this reticence in crossing boundaries as the "law of the threshold" (Lal 1995). According to Lal, a metaphorical limit exists for women dividing the inside, safe place from a dangerous, threatening outside. Traditional beliefs sustain the idea that while men are allowed multiple existences between the home and the world, women are vulnerable outside the protection of domestic patriarchy, and the result is a series of psychological and spatial restrictions for them.

As mentioned above, the two examples taken from contemporary South Asian female fiction that will be analyzed in this article contradict this representation and contrast the stereotype of women bound to tradition and banished from the modern space of the city. *Brick Lane* (Ali 2003), which tells the story of a Bangladeshi family living as migrants in London from the 1970s through 2002, portrays Nazneen, a young woman who evolves from a submissive wife unquestioningly accepting her husband's decisions into a determined entrepreneur running her own clothing business. *The Mistress of Spices* (Divakaruni 1997), set in Oakland, CA, features Tilo, an old mistress who defies the constraints of a patriarchal ideal that confines her to a life of servitude and self-abnegation. As doubly marginalized women—both in terms of race and gender—the two main characters find the metropolis a difficult place to live at first. Presented as a site of isolation, alienation, and disease, the foreign city initially reflects the feelings of loneliness of the diasporic protagonists, who face disorientation and nostalgia amidst the squalid surroundings they inhabit daily. Entrapped "inside [a] concrete slab of entombed humanity" (Ali 2003, p. 76), where physical and psychological restrictions are enforced, the two novels' protagonists live within gendered spaces, where women are supposed to meet patriarchal expectations by acting as caregivers and cultural harbingers. Although they are places that set in motion the gendered identity of the individuals who move through them, the city areas where the immigrant population lives instantiate liminality and, therefore, offer opportunities for the transgression of literal and metaphorical borders. Michel Foucault would call such locations "heterotopic spaces" (Foucault [1967] 1986). As he explains in "Of Other Spaces" (ibid.), unlike utopias, heterotopias are real places acting like counter-sites, with their own rules and specific social order. Theaters, museums, brothels, churches, and cemeteries are some of his examples of heterotopic sites that encompass larger social structures of crisis and enable encounters, juxtapositions, deviation, or continuity. The idea of place as a heterotopic entity shaped by ethnicity, gender, and class has been used widely in social science fields such as human geography and sociology since it can convey the difficulties relating to questions of identity that are provoked by cultural, political, and economic differences. What I take from Foucault's concept is the notion that, for their being geographical outcasts, these locations serve as spaces of otherness, where "undesirable or imperfect aspects" (Le Juez and Richardson 2019, p. 3) are contained and "differences could be embraced" (ibid.). The two streets where the female protagonists live, for instance, symbolize the nest-prison duality in which women frequently find themselves: ambiguously protected from a threatening outside but actually entrapped within a suffocating inside. However, they progressively transform into resilient spaces where "spatial practices of resistance" (Röder 2018, p. 63) can be enacted. Considered as spaces of "teeming multitudinousness" (Khanna 2006, p. 22) and "vivid spaces of plenitude" (Concilio 2003, p. 129), heterotopias represent alternative realities that "defy binary oppositions of centre and margin, of dominance and oppression, . . . of strength and weakness" (Röder 2018, p. 51). In the two books under examination, the immigrants' streets function as heterotopic places that bring into focus the social, cultural, and political systems that form the gendered identities of the protagonists and set in motion the crossing of boundaries. Hence, one could call those border sites "gendered heterotopias". There,

differences are not erased to achieve sameness, uniformity, and predictability. On the contrary, dissonances are kept alive to produce new life conducts and notions of identity. Both streets, at first presented in corporeal terms and described as sick and atrophied parts of the body of the city, can be interpreted as thresholds to be crossed, locations that trigger change and mobility, not only in physical but also psychological/emotional terms, and powerful forces enabling women's personal development.

3. Overcoming the "Immigrant Tragedy": Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Monica Ali's first novel, *Brick Lane*, is set in the homonymous street located in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, commonly referred to as the East End and center of the immigrant Bangladeshi population for over a century. As Sukhdev Sandhu points out, it is "the first novel to focus almost exclusively on the lives of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets", attempting "to take us beyond the yellowing net curtains of their camped tower-block flats, and into their living rooms and bedrooms" (Sandhu 2003, online). Short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, *Brick Lane* was one of the most talked-about and scrutinized books of 2003. The book's widespread popularity is partly due to Ali's personal life circumstances; born in Dhaka to an English mother and a Bangladeshi father, she escaped to Britain with her family during the 1971 Bangladeshi war for independence from Pakistan. However, its publication and subsequent film adaptation in 2007 sparked considerable controversy, especially on the grounds that it conveyed an unflattering representation of the Bangladeshi community around Brick Lane, that it confirmed stereotypes of Muslim immigrants, and that its depiction of an oppressed woman's escape from a suffocating marital relationship reinforced the colonial refrain of the white colonizer's burden to rescue "brown" women. For Susan Stanford Friedman, however, Ali's novel "rejects essentialist identity and advocates the messy ambiguity and creative tensions of cosmopolitan multiplicity" (Friedman 2017, p. 115) thanks to its realist development of controversial migration tropes along gender lines. The creative tensions underlined by Friedman mainly unfold at the topographical level. In her study of spatial practices in the contemporary literature, Anna Beck claims that in *Brick Lane* "the constitution of space and spatial relations on story as well as discourse level have important functions for the understanding of the [novel] as a whole" (Beck 2013, p. 120). Indeed, the novel traces the transformation of the woman protagonist, Nazneen, "from a dependent, isolated wife into an independent, Westernized social actor" through her movement within the "neo-liberal capitalist metropolis" (Ziegler 2007, p. 148, italics in original).

Nazneen was brought to London by her arranged husband, Chanu, in 1985 and spends her daily life in a small public-estate apartment on the street of Brick Lane. As if entrapped in a box, she passes her days surrounded by "furniture to dust and the muffled sound of private lives sealed away above, below and around her" (Ali 2003, p. 24). Born from a traditional Bangladeshi family, she had been taught to be patient, wait in silence, and accept fate as good women do. Hence, she lets life pass, living as subordinate to her husband's and two daughters' needs. Trapped by a patriarchal mindset according to which women are bound to domestic spaces with the role of protecting the authenticity of the family's cultural origins and traditions (Yurval-Davis 1993), Nazneen has little to no chance of leaving her apartment. Far from being a homely place, her dwelling is marked by squalor and gloom, objectified by the "massive black shiny wardrobe" (Ali 2003, p. 76) that dominates the main room. The permanent presence of dust, covering furniture and objects, suggests the stagnation of Nazneen's life, which is stuck between nostalgic memories—represented by the letters she regularly receives from her sister Hasina living in Dhaka—and an uncertain future—made even more precarious by her husband's inconsistent projects. The sinister "shadows across the walls" (ibid.) evoke the looming presence of past traumas, such as the mysterious death of Nazneen's mother during her childhood, which subjects her to enduring material and emotional struggles, including the arranged marriage with Chanu, as well as suffocating traditional beliefs that confine her to the domestic sphere, enforcing the role of the dutiful wife and mother.

The squalid interiors of Brick Lane's apartments, where "greyness [...] seemed to hang over everything" (ibid., p. 71), mirror both the general decaying conditions of that part of the city and the neglected state of its marginalized inhabitants. Following an inductive process, the author provides eloquent descriptions of London's East End as the cancerous part of the city in a rhetoric of bodily development that highlights the reciprocal influence between human bodies and the environment they inhabit. Art historian Lynda Nead considered London as a living organism and claimed that "[its] overgrowth [...] may be compared with that of the [...] human body" (Nead 2000, p. 15). In her view, the metaphorical ailment of the urban space can easily reflect the affliction of the bodies dwelling within it. In a similar vein, feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz underlined the mutually defining relation between the body and the city arguing that on the one hand "[t]he city is a reflection, projection, or product of bodies" (Grosz 1995, p. 383), and on the other, cityscapes "orient and organize family, sexual, and social relations", thus "actively produc[ing] the bodies of their inhabitants" (ibid., p. 386). Tower Hamlet's housing situation, with "*three point five Bangladeshis to one room*" (Ali 2003, p. 49, italics in original), highlights the reciprocal influence of spatial and socio-cultural decay. Associated with evil, darkness, and perdition, that side of London stacked with "entire kingdoms of rubbish piled high as fortresses" (ibid., p. 55) represents the antithesis of order, civility, and decorum. The surroundings take on anthropomorphic traits, while humans resemble animals, in a dystopic interchange of ontological levels. The sickly vision of a rotting environment spans from "the communal bins ring[ing] the courtyard like squat metal warriors that keeled over and spilled [their] guts" (ibid., p. 86) to "a boy, sixteen, seventeen, [who] walks by [...] test[ing] his shoulders this way and that [...] like a chicken, strutting" (ibid., p. 87). The lived spatiality of Brick Lane, dominated by darkness, dirt, and material decay, affects the ways its inhabitants—mostly Bangladeshi immigrants—inhabit it. In turn, the diasporic people's physical and psychological unease is reflected upon the urban landscape and affects its geography.

As the novel describes, the immigrants' lives are hard and offer no rewards for all their efforts in the new land. Chanu calls South Asian immigrants' pervasive sense of failure and resignation "the immigrant tragedy" but fails to recognize the specific condition of displacement lived by women, which is not only due to their immigrant status but also their gender. Being usually unemployed and stuck at home to carry out the "cultural-biological reproduction" of their native collectivity (Kosnick 2013, p. 125), women feel doubly alienated in that sea of human wreckage. In discussing different gender experiences in the diaspora, Anne McClintock (1995) argues that while men occupy the dimension of time, being future-oriented, linear, and projected towards change and progress, women occupy the dimension of space as they are linked to the past, local traditions, and the static environment of the household. Nazneen, however, feeling the pulsating energy of the city attracting her from the outside, attempts to break this cycle of isolation on multiple occasions. One day, for instance, she asks her husband for permission to go to college and learn English, but the only response she receives is: "'What for? [...] You're going to be a mother'". (Ali 2003, p. 77). In the name of a traditional idea of womanhood, every effort made by the novel's female protagonist to venture beyond the domestic sphere is thwarted by a patriarchal force, embodied by a husband who denies her any possibility to inhabit the public space of the city.

However, as an internal force shaping the story from within, the city of London serves as a magnet for Nazneen. Enchanted by the metropolis' vibrating atmosphere, the woman increasingly carries out imperceptible yet empowering acts of rebellion that enable her to cross boundaries, both geographic and symbolic. The first contacts Nazneen has with London occur in her husband's presence. When she needed a new sari, he would take her to a Bengali clothing shop on Bethnal Green Road. Instead of window shopping and looking at the wares in the stores, Nazneen admired the metropolitan landscape, "[...] the gray towers, the blown-by forgotten strands of sky between them" (Ali 2003, p. 43). The foreign grandeur of the cityscape does not intimidate Nazneen. On the contrary, it

fascinates her to the extent that she begins taking short, solitary, and furtive trips to the city. Almost unconsciously, as if to push both her own limits and the limits imposed by others, Nazneen goes beyond the borders of Brick Lane, out of her comfort zone. Her exploration of the urban landscape begins like a rash escape as “she turned off at random, began to run, [...] and [...] sensed rather than saw” (ibid., p. 55). As soon as she “slowed down and looked around her” (ibid.), however, her experience of the city becomes more conscious and intentional. Her attentive scrutiny of the surroundings shows her that alternative ways of living are possible and that women may find autonomy and independence when space allows freedom of movement and expression. After spending a day in the city alone, Nazneen feels incredibly empowered and once at home, listening to her husband boasting about a promotion he will never receive, observes:

Anything is possible. [...] Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub. To use the toilet. Did you think I could do that? I walked mile upon mile, probably around the whole of London, although I did not see the edge of it. And to get home again I went to a restaurant. I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked for directions. See what I can do! (ibid., p. 63, italics in original)

The contacts between Nazneen and the urban space remain intermittent for a long time, until one day, her husband gives her a sewing machine so that she can start working and contributing to the family finances. The beginning of this activity marks Nazneen’s return to the city to buy sewing tools and her self-esteem is immediately re-awakened. Together with her friend, Razia, who also works as a seamstress, she frequently visits the city to have a look at the shop windows. During these trips, Nazneen shows initiative and enthusiasm. Arguably, the space of the city infuses her with a sense of liberation and empowerment which gives her the courage to challenge her fate and take the reins of her life back. When her husband, whose experience as an expatriate turns out to be a failure, wants to take the whole family back to Dhaka, she bravely refuses to go and claims: “*I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one*”. (ibid., p. 405, italics in original). In contrast to what she had been taught to do all her life, she establishes that she will be the master of her fate. She sees there are possibilities for her—and for her daughters—in London, and she is right. At the end of the novel, together with Razia, she sets up a clothing business doing the design herself and successfully selling her garments in different areas of the city. Interestingly, the sewing machine, which might initially appear as another instrument of gender discrimination within the narrative, undergoes a complete shift in meaning when viewed within the urban backdrop. Although Nazneen received it from her husband so that she could start supporting the family financially, she eventually challenges and renegotiates the patriarchal underpinnings of this gift by leveraging it to her own benefit. The transformation of the sewing machine from a symbol of oppression into one of liberation occurs only when its potential is transposed beyond the confines of domesticity and into the urban environment, where it serves as a fundamental tool to reach both financial independence and personal achievement.

The last image of Nazneen taking a trip to the city, precisely to Liverpool Street, is the most eloquent demonstration of the fact that her process of adaptation to the new land has not only started but has engendered an interesting syncretic mechanism between the two cultures that now cohabit inside her. On Nazneen’s birthday, Razia and her daughters surprise her by bringing her to a skating rink, where she chooses to skate on the glittering ice in a full-flowing sari. Free in motion and speed, but with her sari on, Nazneen is embarking on her own journey of acculturation in London, shaping a new hybrid identity that blends her past and present selves. Although the outcome of the woman’s endeavor to live independently in the English capital remains uncertain, a successful spatial integration has occurred, since the city has offered her the opportunity to move freely, both metaphorically and literally, by challenging gender conventions and becoming a figure of adaptive hybridity. Nazneen’s personal path towards the formulation of a new gender identity through the renegotiation of spatiality shows that challenging

certain ways in which space and place are conceptualized implies challenging the dominant form of gender definition and gender relations.

4. On the Wrong Side: Chitra Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

The condition of female seclusion within a restricted space in the name of tradition, as evidenced in *Brick Lane*, is also present in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (Divakaruni 1997). As a magical realist tale, Divakaruni's representation is both compelling and fantastic given that she is a diasporic writer who "continuously deliberates upon the cultural pulls of her homeland on the one hand, and the empowerment coupled with racial segregation in contemporary multicultural America, on the other" (Krishna 2014, p. 8). Born and raised in Kolkata, India, and emigrating to the United States for her graduate studies, the author is known for her meticulous exploration of the immigrant experience, mainly that of South Asian women. As she states on her website, in order to earn money for her education, she did many jobs, which allowed her to come into contact with different aspects of the American culture as well as the hardship of being a South Asian woman in the West. Her depiction of the woman protagonist's emancipation in the new land in *The Mistress of Spices* reflects a trend that contrasts "the Western Orientalist representation of South Asian women as passive victims" (Schlote 2006, p. 402). In this respect, Christiane Schlote notes that a shift has occurred in South Asian American women writers' portrayal of female protagonists who have transformed from dependent migrant wives to autonomous agents forging a new subjectivity in the diaspora. Several studies have examined the main character's progress toward individual and social maturity at a psychical level (Nubile 2003; Vega-González 2003; Krishna 2014; Goswami 2021). However, it is crucial to note that the protagonist's emancipation also takes place at a physical level thanks to a series of transgressive spatial interactions occurring within the diasporic city, where the novel is set.

The main events of the book take place in Oakland, CA, within the Spice Bazaar located on the street of Esperanza and run by Tilo, the female protagonist of the story. Belonging to the genre of magical realism, the novel mixes fantasy and reality and talks about an Indian woman gifted with magical powers who learns how to master the art of communicating with spices and using their precious powers, thus becoming a mistress of spices. After being trained on an enchanted island, she is sent to America to soothe the Indian immigrants' pains and their feelings of alienation and loneliness. As a microcosm of India, Tilo's shop is the place where diasporic customers can be comforted by the smell, sight, touch, and taste of familiar things. This, however, means devoting herself to the spices, leading a life of confinement and self-abnegation.

The shop where she is sent, a little patch of India that fits into an inconspicuous American street, is located "on the crooked corner of Esperanza. There, the Oakland buses hiss to a stop [. . .]" (ibid., p. 4). As its name suggests, this street is not only the representation of the immigrants' hopes for a better life but also of the hardships they have to face in the destination country. The ambivalent condition of Indian immigrants, caught between the prospect of a bright future and the frustration of a difficult present, is emblemized by the decaying state of numerous multi-ethnic shops situated along the street. The snapshot that Divakaruni offers of Esperanza Street highlights places such as the Rosa Weekly Hotel, "still blackened from a year-ago fire" (ibid.) and "Lee Ying's Sewing Machine and Vacuum Cleaner Repair with the glass cracked between *R* and the *e*" (ibid.), which are the visual representations of the hardships the shop's immigrant owners must endure. Inside the decaying buildings of Esperanza Street, there is Tilo's shop, signaled by "[l]ooped letters that say SPICE BAZAAR faded into a dried-mud brown" (ibid.). Shifting the focus from the outside to the inside, the narrator remarks on the cultural importance of the bazaar, where "accumulated among dust balls, exhaled by those who have entered here, [were stored] the desires" (ibid.). The spice shop and its owner offer both material and emotional nourishment to the displaced customers, who need to remain connected to their place of origin and culture. While the shop offers protection and comfort, the outside remains a racist, discriminatory, and even dangerous place. Alongside bullied teenagers

and humiliated men exploited by their employers, women face the hardest conditions. Bound at home, they “*[run] back and forth from kitchen to front window*” (ibid., p. 61, italics in original), feeling disoriented, worried, and powerless in a space that is hostile towards both their children and husbands. Tilo’s responsibility is to offer care and support. However, both the shop and her older body, which she was magically given to run the spice shop, represent an entrapment. Any exploration of the world outside the shop and any expansion of her experiential horizon are denied.

If, in the beginning, Tilo accepts her role of mother, sister, friend, and healer, Esperanza Street will have an unexpected effect on her. It will gradually disclose to her the possibility of fashioning a different, independent self, a self that will challenge the imposition she succumbed to by the authority bestowed on traditional customs and values. Unlike most traditional South Asian narratives, where the drive to commit transgression comes from the inside, i.e., restricted domestic places, Divakaruni’s book features the outside, namely the city, as the trigger of change and mobility. In the vast metropolitan space, where, as Elizabeth Wilson suggests, it is difficult to keep track of women (Wilson 1991), womanhood as a construct can be questioned and redefined. The spice store, with its clear, impermeable boundaries, represents a location where women’s identity is secured and kept under control. The meaning of this place, constructed by the Indian traditional culture, is marked by stasis, passivity, and nostalgia, which are all attributes conventionally associated with the feminine. However, Esperanza Street and, more in general, the big city introduce Tilo into a world that lies beyond the fixed limits imposed on her store. The interconnections the woman establishes with that “beyond” destabilize not only the unquestioned meaning of the space she dwells in but also her own conception of gender roles. In other words, the metropolitan setting induces Tilo to think in terms of relations rather than enclosure, which results in a new way of seeing space as a dimension of mobility and flow.

The clearest instances showcasing the evolving relationship between Tilo and her surrounding environment are represented by her crossings of the store’s boundaries. The first time she leaves the shop is when she decides to personally visit one of her customers and take her a handcrafted remedy. Tilo eagerly anticipates her engagement with the urban space, planning to “stretch [her] wings, to crack [. . .] these shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the outside world” (ibid., p. 125). The vibrant city, with its many opportunities and multiple identities, calls Tilo from the outside “in its many-tongued voice” (ibid.), and the shield embodied by her store cannot prevent her from listening. Stepping outside the space of the shop is an incredibly powerful act, a challenge to the values she has never questioned, since “[n]ever before [had she] driven [her] desire against duty” (ibid., p. 126). Divakaruni’s protagonist’s liberating action recognizes the agency of displaced women who inhabit a transnational space. Avtar Brah has claimed that “diasporas are [. . .] potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings” (Brah 2005, p. 193). Considering the ambiguous role played by the foreign land, which “either offers new roles for women or creates a new patriarchal structure” (Kaur 2015, p. 86), Divakaruni invites women to take advantage of the new setting and the self-fashioning possibilities it contains.

The path toward self-determination, however, is not without its challenges. In leaving the suffocating space of the shop, Tilo makes herself vulnerable. Compared to the stable and familiar environment of the spice store, the dynamic city of Oakland, emanating simultaneously “pain, fear, and love” (Divakaruni 1997, p. 63), deprives her of the certainties she had always relied on and confronts her with the risk of not fully belonging anywhere. The scene depicting the mistress leaving the bazaar conveys the image of the ambiguous role of tradition, which serves as both a source of protection and oppression and makes women falter in their self-belief:

Under my palm the knob is slick and stubborn. The hinges stick, mutinous. The store’s muscles wrestling mine . . . until at length I can bang the door shut. The sound is sharp as a shot, terminal. I am left shivering on the step. On the wrong side, says the voice in my brain. [. . .] I am struck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness. (ibid., p. 128)

The sound of the door shut behind Tilo's back reproduces on a sensory level the consequences of stepping out of traditional gender roles and being on the "wrong side". However, if on the one hand Tilo faces the disorienting feeling of being homeless, torn between a place she can no longer call home and a new land that is not home yet, on the other hand, the city of Oakland compensates for this lack of protection, offering different possibilities for personal growth. Within the metropolitan space, Tilo can reach independence, have encounters, and achieve freedom of expression. After changing into Western clothes and leaving the store, Tilo heads to the bus stop, where she behaves naturally among the other "strands of brown and white and black" (ibid., p. 139), reassured by the fact that "when the bus comes she will surge at it with the others" (ibid.). Freed from the feeling of being controlled and directed by an ever-present force, Tilo joins the ordinary flow of life, which makes her experience a deep sense of empowerment. She stops at a big department store and "loosens her muscles" (ibid., p. 131), rejoicing at "the anonymity of [her] first American store" (ibid., p. 130) and her "new-clothed self" (ibid., p. 131). The woman's willingness to adopt the Western way of dressing is not a desire to "emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry" (Bhabha 1984, p. 129), but rather an attempt to develop a new gendered identity shaped by both ancestral knowledge and self-determination. When she makes the decision to leave the store and prepares a potion to "attire [herself] for America" (Divakaruni 1997, p. 135), she creatively puts tradition at the service of her plans of transgression, "bending the spices' will to [hers]" (ibid.). Thus, even though no protection can be granted to rebellious women like her, Tilo carves out her own moment of contentment and absorbs all the energy it can provide to pursue her dream of independence. Chitra B. Divakaruni, in an interview with Frederick Aldama, states: "Often in many cultures, it's either/or for women. You can either have this or that, but you can't have both" (Aldama and Divakaruni 2000, p. 7). Tilo's achievement lies in her decision to follow her heart's desires and rebel against the rule of the spices, despite the warnings and dangers, ultimately attaining an autonomous identity.

The second and most crucial time Tilo leaves her store is when she agrees to spend a day with the American man with whom she falls in love. The brief car trip and the seemingly trivial experiences they enjoy, like smelling fresh air and admiring the sky, for Tilo mean a change of perspective as well as a step towards liberation. The day culminates with the two having sex, which shows how stepping out of the local and joining the open space of the city can engender different kinds of awakening in women entrapped by traditional values, including a sexual awakening. As Phillipa Kafka notes, Divakaruni is the first feminist Indian author who has portrayed an old woman with sexual desire (Kafka 2003, p. 156). Not only has she broken a cultural taboo about old women, but she has also depicted desire as a way for women to establish control over their own bodies. After a day spent in the free and dynamic space of the city, Tilo understands that she does not have to choose one single identity but can negotiate successfully the in-betweenness that characterizes her. In other words, by accepting the multiplicity within herself, she embraces the idea that she is the result of the combination of numerous, sometimes conflicting, nuances: She is biologically young but physically old. She is a mistress with magical powers, but, fundamentally, an ordinary woman. She is Indian, but she also belongs to America.

The protagonist's contacts with the city contribute to the development of a different outlook on life, which, Tilo learns, goes beyond the waiting, the passive resignation to one's fate, and the submission to the domestic duties designed for women. In fact, self-determination, self-care, and commitment to one's own goals are important drivers—more powerful than any magical spice—for developing a strong female individuality. In light of this drastic change of perspective, the spice shop—and all it represents—no longer has a reason to exist. Indeed, towards the end of the story, it physically disintegrates following a devastating earthquake. Interestingly, the line of fracture passes right under Tilo's shop, which ends up being split apart. All the binary divisions it represents are now evident but also blurred: inside/outside, here (the United States)/there (India), center/periphery,

present/past, and magical/ordinary. Paradoxically, while escaping from the city devastated by the earthquake, the mistress feels the need to go back there because it is only by embracing fracturing that she can really feel whole. As Raussert Wilfried has stated, “[r]eturning to the earthquake area, [Tilo] demonstrates that she has integrated motherly instructions for social responsibility into her own dream of self-fulfillment” (Wilfried 2003, p. 199). This is also confirmed by the new name she chooses for herself in this new phase of her life, Maya, which combines both her Indian and American soul. The woman protagonist realizes that the only way to become free is to accept her double nature as Indian and American, thus finally developing a “transnational hybridized identity” (Vega-González 2003, p. 6). And the city of Oakland, despite being a site of instability, fractures, uncertainties, and split selves, is also the place of possibilities and new beginnings. Regardless of the open ending of the book, the author leaves clues that Tilo/Maya will continue her life in America, running her spice shop but with a completely different awareness of her own value both as a woman and as a person with a hyphenated identity.

5. Conclusions

The two urban environments analyzed in this article, embodied by the streets of Brick Lane and Esperanza, are not merely the settings of their respective novels, but locations that contain the history of the diasporic communities that live there. The diasporic contexts examined, and specifically those in which women’s lives unfold, are heterotopias that set in motion the story and enable the transgression of borders thanks to the multiple cultural and social forces that regulate them. Serving as containers of the history of the Bangladeshi community in England and the Indian community in America, the immigrants’ streets embody “roots” (Clifford 1992) anchoring the displaced to the past. At the same time, however, they are triggers for histories of the future, “routes” (ibid.) leading the female protagonists towards self-realization and liberation from cultural constrictions.

On the one hand, the cities of London and Oakland are multicultural places of racial and social oppression, where asymmetrical relations of power are held, imperial encounters take place, and violence, terror, and exclusion are enacted. On the other hand, however, they serve as “safe houses” (Pratt 1991) for immigrant women, i.e., places “in which to construct shared understanding, knowledge, [and] claims on the world” (ibid., p. 40). Nazneen and Tilo progressively come to view their respective cities as places of cultural recognition and meaningful encounters, locations of healing and growth, spaces of creativity and escape from legacies of oppression. Thanks to their transformative and creative energy, the two women are able to find their place in the metropolis by working out not only a new personal identity but also a new notion of center/periphery. Through their businesses, they show that the streets of immigrants could change from dilapidated, peripheral sites of perdition into centers of activity, exchange, and ideas. In conclusion, as the milieu of becoming, the urban environment is a place of identity transformation for women who eventually find their self-realization not in stable, restricted, or static places, but in contexts that are changing, in progress, and dynamically and actively produced.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Note

¹ See, for instance, novels like Shashi Deshpande’s *Small Remedies* (Deshpande 2000), Anita Desai’s *Fasting Feasting* (Desai 2000), and Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupé* (Nair 2001).

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