



Flavours of the Roots in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* skillfully blends elements of magical realism to explore the complex interplay between food, migration, and identity. The narrative foregrounds the experiences of immigrants who, although geographically separated from their homeland, remain emotionally and culturally connected through food practices. Food becomes more than sustenance; it acts as a repository of memory, a link to tradition, and a medium through which cultural continuity is preserved across generations. At the center of the novel stands Tilo, a mystical figure endowed with the power to heal through the supernatural qualities of spices. Through food and spices, Divakaruni emphasizes how immigrants negotiate belonging in a foreign land, using cultural practices to foster care, community, and identity.

Keywords: Magical realism, food, migration, identity, memory, displacement.

1 Introduction: The Recipe of Displacement and Magical Realism

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the key figures in South Asian diasporic literature. She writes about the immigrant experience and its dynamics in the west. She provides an experience of how immigrants in the west share a very complex relationship with the new land. Her work specifically addresses themes of generational trauma and existential crisis.

Divakaruni has discussed the process of immigrants adopting to new cultures and blending into the culture that seems alien to them. Her usage of magical realism combined with mythical elements makes her works stand out in the arena of Indian English Literature. Her portrayal of the cross-cultural experiences and identity crisis represents the process of adaptation of the Indian diaspora. Her blending of various post-colonial themes makes her writing a representation of Post colonial canon.

2 *The Mistress of Spices* (1997)

The Mistress of Spices is considered one of the best writings of Divakaruni. The novel explores the importance of food in the Indian continent. She brings out the diasporic

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sensibility through each chapter that speaks of a spice and its importance. She adds magical realism, much like Indians add spices, so as to make the novel full of flavor. The migrants in the novel hold on to their food as their identity and buying spices signify an important duty to uphold their roots. With each spice, Divakaruni represents the character each Indian wishes for, and the cure to their trauma that are relived again and again in the foreign land.

3 **Magical Mysticism and Postcolonial Representation**

Tilo, being the protagonist of the novel, moves into the magical world of spices, where every spice speaks in a language communicating support and understanding. In Oakland, California, Tilo runs a spice shop filled with magic and mysticism. She is portrayed as an old entrepreneur who runs a shop in one corner of a street in California. Her shop is representative of the cultural values of India and she adds culinary elements through her communications with the spices. Every individual who comes to her shop comes with a recipe for hope, and Tilo reads each one of them through her powers and provides the cure through these mystical spices (Divakaruni 1997). The simple Indian spices become magical elements that transform the lives of the people who need them most.

This research paper explores the magical powers of the spices, representing magical realism through the lives of people whom Tilo meets in her shop. It also covers the culture of the Indian spices and their representation as the cure for not only physical ailments but also for the emotional needs, promoting Indian culture and Indian knowledge about the power of natural remedies. The framework also covers the post-colonial understanding of the text, one that essentially revolves around hybridity, cultural memory, and identity through a reading of spices in the text.

Paper analyses the cultural studies of the Indian spices that represent the Indianness of the spices mentioned. The postcolonial aspect explores the search for identity and the problems of the transformation into hybrid individuals in a foreign land and also searches for the oppression of the feminine and the environment that subjugates her natural ability and emotions.

4 **The Transformative Power of Culture in *The Mistress of Spices***

The spices become the identity of the Indian diaspora, and using the spices becomes the power tool for the Indians, which becomes the bridge between their roots and the new culture. Food becomes the cultural artifact, and the usage of it gives them an identity which the diasporic community does not want to lose (Eagleton, 1998). Tilo's shop also represents the Indian community, and the postcolonial setup details the way in which the community is looked down upon in the western world.

Food narratives play an important part throughout the novel. Each chapter is named after a spice, and the readers see, feel, smell, taste, and hear the sounds made by it.

These spices become the symbol of resistance and identity for the diasporic community, and they help in forming new cultural identities, combining with the American culture.

Most of the Indians who have pursued their American Dream cannot step back and reach back to India to lead a simple life that is considered inferior to the American lifestyle. Even though the Indians miss being home, they adapt to the new culture that pulls them into xenophobic situations (Ghosh 2000). To overcome these identity crises, spices are looked upon as blessings that remind the community of their roots and culture. These spices also hold tightly to the Indian heritage which the immigrants are proud of in the alien land. Each spice and its qualities tap the memory of the ancestral knowledge that has been passed over for more than hundreds of generations. The spiritual journey these spices take them through is also a reminder of the culture where they come from. The usage of these spices by the foreign nationals explores the concept of hybridity from the other side where the Indian spices are accepted and respected for the qualities they possess.

5 Ecofeminist Critique: Purity, Patriarchy, and Nature

The novel connects the patriarchal society and its capitalist ideologies through an ecofeminist framework. Each spice, with its special qualities, not only serves as medicine but also cures the emotional emptiness the women face in their household. The power of spices is celebrated through the cure it provides to the women who are suffering silently and look for help without hurting the egos of the male community.

Shared Exploitation: The uprooting of the spices for human benefit and the uprooting of women's freedom through subjugation by the patriarchal society mirrors the shared exploitation of both women and nature. Spices in general are identified with women to represent the qualities of love, support, and emotional bonding. This again stands as a prejudice against women, who are supposed to hold all these emotions, whereas men stay aloof from emotional connection. Tilo, the protagonist and the woman's representative, has to forgo her youth to protect herself from this materialistic world. The loss of her youth is the sacrifice she needs to make to keep this patriarchal society satisfied. By choosing to be an old woman, she is constrained to the real world, and her emotions of love and touch are forsaken so as to appease the patriarchal mentality.

The Purity Mandate: Tilo is made to purify herself and renounce her worldly pleasures to make this society a better place to live in. Her 'purity' needs to be proved and protected, which is an act of entrapment and a source of distancing herself from her real self. The rigid protection of female purity in the name of tradition is highlighted in the novel.

Ecofeminist Act: The act of Tilo breaking the binding bonds of her sacredness at the climax of the story for her love stands as an epitome of breaking free of the societal expectations for a woman. This breaking symbolizes the shattering of the chains placed on a woman in the name of standards set for women. Tilo's strength to break the rules stands as a tipping point in the lives of all women who understand their power of freedom. Through the cure provided to the silently suffering women who look for help

without hurting the egos of the male community, the novel celebrates the power of spices.

6 Hybridity as identity

The identity of Tilo is always in between – Old and Young, Real world and Magical world, Original name and Given name, Wants and Needs, Original self vs Accepted self, Love vs Duty.

Rebirth: Nayan Tara, meaning 'Star-seer' and not just 'star', takes for her name Tilo, referring to 'til' or sesame seed, and ends up choosing Maya, a term that refers to the illusory nature of the world and not just 'magical world'. She had to pass through the Fire of Sampathi which cleanses her of all the worldly attachments and makes her an ageless saint or 'Mistress of Spices' who cares for and cures people using the medicinal and magical spices. It is this in-between identity, as stated before, human versus Mistress, which is defined by the name Tilo and is retained throughout the text. Her journey inside the Sampathi Fire can be compared to the journey of the phoenix which burns itself to rise out of the ashes of its own to claim its new identity.

Tilo changes her identity from a human girl to a mystical being. This in-between space is not the place that can be called a home. Tilo yearns to go back to the island where she learned about the magic of the spices. The Mother, or the Old One who is the head of the Mistresses, chooses her knowing her rebellious nature and she was worried about Tilo as she might break her vow. Tilo's rebellious nature with a good heart win at the end where she becomes a happy human at the end of the novel with a new hybrid identity.

Change becomes Essential: The lives of all immigrants undergo a series of changes. They need to adapt to the new land, culture, language, food, climate, and people, government, etc., etc. In the story of Tilo, many changes become essential for her in order to adapt to the American way of living. Even the people she comes across struggle to adapt to the change, and most of them yearn to go back to their own homeland. They begin to adapt to the change when they come to realize that their American Dream has turned into a reality and that they cannot afford to lose it. All the Indian characters portrayed in the story have adapted to the change but have neither forgotten nor wish to lose their homeland. These dreams later become post memory through which their identities are represented (Hirsch 1997).

Hybridity has never been a new concept to Indians; they share the values of their homeland while also adapting to U.S. customs. Tilo's hybridity operates on two distinct levels: the cultural blend of India and America, and the temporal blend of the old and the new, representing her as the hybrid of the future.

7 Identity of Spices

The very first chapter is titled Tilo; this is the name of the spice Til. Tilo says she loves spices, and these spices originating from her homeland are in possession of magical

powers, which give the entire novel the platform. The spice is also symbolic of the spice of nourishment. Tilo nourishes the customers with her magic, much like the spice Til.

Next comes the turmeric chapter, which falls on the special day of Sunday and is called auspicious, giving a golden glow to the skin, and it is trusted by the brides-to-be. The third chapter is titled Cinnamon, which means friendship and reconciliation. The fourth chapter is titled Fenugreek, the love spice, which restores love to the longing ones. The fifth chapter is titled Asafoetida, which is the antidote to love. The next chapter, Fennel, cools the temper and also imparts mental strength. Ginger is the root of gnarled wisdom. Kalo Jire wades off evil eye. Red Chilli represents anger and passion. Makaradwaj conquers time. Lotus Root is the medicine for love longing.

Table 1. The Semantics of Spice: Cultural Functions and Diasporic Remedies

Spice/Element	Mystical Function and Cultural Symbolism	Significance in Diaspora Studies
Turmeric	<i>Healing, purity, solar energy, anti-septic (physical and emotional)</i>	Affirms traditional remedies' efficacy and cultural validity.
Cumin	<i>Warding off evil, protection from danger</i>	Affirms traditional Tool for cultural self-protection against a hostile environment
Coriander	<i>Soothing, mental clarity against cultural confusion/dissonance</i>	Acts as a psychological anchor against assimilation pressure
Fenugreek/Cardamom	<i>Evokes nostalgia, grounds characters in Indian heritage</i>	Direct sensory link to homeland memory (memory materialization)
Shampati's Fire	<i>Destruction of the old self; creation of a new, erratic self</i>	Metaphor for the violent but necessary process of diasporic identity formation

8 Negotiating Belonging: From Purity to Hybridity

The Mistress of Spices also characterizes the process of hybridity through a representation of the transition that different generations undergo. The process happens in the “third space” where the hybrid identities are represented (Homi K Bhabha 1994). The elders often struggle in accepting the change but choose silence as their response. The young try to adapt with it easily, but their roots still call them to stay grounded. The internal and external troubles the migrants undergo are represented well through each character and how Tilo helps them through their troubles. The spice shop becomes the mini-version of India where each community and character is entering and trying to find solutions for their troubles. Tilo uses the spices to provide them the perfect cure,

and through the spices, the characters undergo a change which moves them from purity to hybridity.

9 The Tension of Hybridity

Indian culture, spices, and their powers are portrayed by Tilo, who gets overpowered by human emotions. The sacred vow is broken, and she knows the repercussions of the same. Raven's love and touch become more important for Tilo than the eternal powers that she can possess as *The Mistress of Spices*. Her love for each human she helps slowly grows into her and breaks the rigid vow she took to keep her sacred state in the new world. When Tilo breaks her vows, the spices become angry and they show their anger, give advice, and ask her to restrain from earthly pleasures, as she is made for higher things.

The moment Tilo accepts Raven, she feels that the spices are moving away from her. She has been given the choice of eternal duty or a mortal one. Tilo chooses the mortal life to be with her loved one. The spice shop is destroyed by the same fire which purified her. Tilo takes the name of Maya, referring to illusion as her hybrid identity. She leaves the spices, their magical powers, and her name as *The Mistress of Spices* to lead a new life which seems perfect for her. This transition leads Tilo from her original mystical nature to a hybrid, human nature.

10 Conclusion: Home to Spices

The Mistress of Spices is about magical realism in its truest sense, and the portrayal of the magical elements and the unseen magic created by the spices deliberates on the supernatural elements of everyday life. Indian spices, so important in the global arena, show how Indian spices are welcomed into different cultures of the world in this well-written work. Spices play the protagonists that drive characters to different destinies. The knowledge of spices and the power they possess adds to the Indian knowledge system that the world is looking for at this moment.

The experiences of the immigrants are well narrated, and their varied experiences run through the pages of the novel. The spice shop functions as a mini-India where the culture and food confluence to provide a transformation to the diasporic community. Hybridity happens with not leaving one's own culture but by adapting to the newness which the newfound land provides. Tilo's transformation provides the strongest evidence that hybridity is always adopted to keep the human nature rather than running behind superpowers.

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