

Culinary Cartographies: Mapping Indian Tradition in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Chitra Divakaruni uses spices, herbs, and food practices to trace and transport cultural knowledge across diasporic space. The novel stages an embodied cartography in which scent, taste, and ritual cuisine function as navigational tools for memory, belonging, and ethical relation. Through the figure of the Mistress—both healer and custodian of Ayurvedic and culinary lore—Divakaruni translates domestic foodways into public acts of care that mediate loneliness, repair broken relationships, and create cross-cultural solidarities. Reading the text through sensory and humanist lenses reveals how culinary practices operate as portable archives: they conserve ancestral know-how, adapt to new environments, and generate affective bonds that sustain diasporic communities. By locating tradition in everyday nourishment and healing, the novel reconceptualizes cultural transmission as a tactile, nourishing practice rather than a static inheritance.

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Indian diasporic writers have occupied a prominent place over the past two decades, largely because their works generate new theoretical insights into migration, identity, and cultural exchange. Writing from between homelands and hostlands, these authors build bridges that link memories of origin with the realities of new lives. Their characters often live at the margins of two cultures, fashioning secure, hybrid spaces that negotiate belonging. Although the experience of homelessness and dislocation that many migrants endure is real and acute, contemporary networks of solidarity — including social media and community ties — have lessened its intensity. Bhikhu Parekh captures this adaptive capacity when he likens the diasporic Indian to “a banyan tree,” spreading roots into several soils and drawing nourishment from each; rather than being rootless, the diasporic subject comes to feel at home in multiple places (106). From this standpoint, diasporic literature serves not only to illuminate cultural difference but also to bridge nations, globalize local practices, and foster wider understanding.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands out among these writers for the way she weaves Indian culture into the fabric of her fiction: food, dress, rituals, language, and religious practices shape her narratives and leave lasting impressions of Indian life on readers. This study foregrounds one such enduring strand — the knowledge of spices and herbs used for healing — which is central to Indian cultural memory. Divakaruni draws on the ancient, generative resources of Ayurveda in *The Mistress of Spices*, translating these practices into scenes of care, nourishment, and cultural continuity. Deeply rooted in her heritage, Divakaruni acts as a cultural emissary: she preserves and promotes facets of Indian tradition, rendering them accessible and resonant in diasporic contexts.

Culture, in this view, comprises the everyday behaviors, beliefs, and values passed across generations. It is a way of life that shapes how people live, make meaning, and draw on inherited wisdom. In Divakaruni's work, culinary knowledge — the rites of cookery, the uses of particular spices and herbs, and the ethical impulse to care through food — functions as a living archive. These practices guide communities, sustain individuals, and carry forward ancestral intelligence into new worlds.

Knowledge of Ayurveda—its remedies, dietary practices, and plant-based therapies—remains both deep-rooted and widely respected. Divakaruni renders this wisdom accessible in *The Mistress of Spices*, using story to broadcast the curative and cultural value of Indian spices and herbs. While India is often imagined abroad through images of mysticism and yoga, the novel extends that image by offering textured, everyday knowledge of Ayurvedic practice. India's long history of scientific and cultural achievement—across medicine, astronomy, foodways, and more—finds another channel of transmission in literature, and Divakaruni mines her memory and imagination to present fresh facets of her homeland.

The novel centers on Tilo, born Nayantara—"star seer"—an unwanted child in a poor South Indian family whose early life is marked by neglect. As she grows, her gift for seeing what others cannot becomes apparent: lost things reappear, dangers are foreseen, and her reputation spreads. Kidnapped by coastal raiders and later rescued with the aid of serpents, she escapes to an island where an ageless woman, called the Old One or the First Mother, trains girls in various arts. Under the Old One's tutelage, Nayantara learns to work with spices, discovering their curative potentials and the ethical responsibilities that accompany such knowledge. Quick to learn, she chooses the name Tilo and selects Oakland as the place to practice. The Old One appoints her mistress of spices but warns her of strict rules: do not pry into others' lives, do not touch those who come for help, do not leave the shop, and never use spices for selfish ends.

After enduring Shampati's fire, Tilo inhabits the body of an elderly woman, a disguise that masks her true self while enabling her work. In Oakland she runs her Spice Bazaar, and the novel's structure—its chapter titles and metonymic references—echoes the qualities, origins, and uses of individual spices. Divakaruni shows how spices participate in healing both body and mind: each spice answers a particular human need. Trained by the Old One, Tilo adheres to the belief that "different spices may help us with different troubles, and for each person, there is one special spice" (p.71). She presses sandalwood into Haroun's palm to ease haunting memories, hands black pepper to Daksha to embolden her to refuse patriarchal pressures, gives kesar and almond powder to soften the speech and temper of Gita's grandfather, and offers lotus root powder to Hameeda to open the heart to love. In these acts, spices function less like inert ingredients and more like living collaborators—nonhuman characters imbued with remedial and mythic force—so that culinary practice becomes a humanist mode of care, cultural preservation, and moral intervention.

The novel opens with a chapter named "Tilo" (derived from *til*), followed by thirteen chapters titled after specific spices and substances—Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, KaloJire, Neem, Red Chilli, Makardwaj, Lotus Root, and Sesame—each signaling the role that spice will play in that section.

Explaining the prominence of spices, Divakaruni told UCTV that they behave like characters: they have personalities, form relationships with Tilo, and speak to her, showing affection or anger. In this way the spices become active interlocutors in the narrative, not mere ingredients.

Rooted in Indian knowledge systems, Divakaruni uses the novel to internationalize the therapeutic wisdom of Ayurveda. Tilo is crafted as a spice healer, her store stocked with “every Indian spice,” a claim that registers both devotion and cultural archive. She speaks of her spices with intimacy and authority: she knows their origins, colors, and scents; she invokes the names given to them at the world’s first offerings; their heat and hidden powers answer to her. This rhetoric situates spices as ancestral companions, carrying embodied histories and mnemonic force.

The Indian subcontinent’s reputation as a “land of spices” is harnessed here not only for culinary texture but for medicinal and ritual value. Divakaruni weaves botanical and cultural knowledge into the fictional fabric, so that each spice’s generic qualities illuminate character, plot, and healing praxis.

- Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*; Sanskrit Haridhara, “the golden one”) carries healing, preservative, and spiritual meanings. Its bright yellow is likened to daybreak; it marks births and weddings and is used in rites of luck and protection. In the novel turmeric functions as a restorative salve—erasing blemishes, imparting glow—and Tilo gives turmeric powder to Lalita, along with a blessing, to ease her suffering.
- Cinnamon (dalchini), derived from the inner bark of *Cinnamomum*, is prized both for aroma and medicinal effect. Noted for benefits such as improving glucose regulation and lowering triglycerides, cinnamon becomes in Tilo’s hands a spice of fortification and social ease: she tucks a cinnamon stick into Jagjit’s turban to help him make friends and to grow the strength—especially the verbal boldness—to resist mistreatment.
- Fenugreek, a small plant whose leaves and seeds serve as aromatic spice and remedy, contains antioxidants and rich nutrients. Mythic origin stories in the text link it to ancient women sages, and its bitter taste is said to render the body “sweet again,” opening it to love and healing. Tilo applies fenugreek therapeutically for serious conditions—using it to treat Ratna’s poisoned womb and to assist Binita, who faces breast cancer.
- Asafoetida, a hard resinous gum from the root-stock of *Ferula asafoetida*, carries a sharp, sulfurous odor reminiscent of onion. Its botanical name hints at its nature—*Ferula* as carrier, with resinous and pungent associations—and its pungency underlies a long history of medicinal use: it is employed for flatulence, loss of appetite, ulcers, respiratory troubles, anti-helminthic needs, and even hysteria. In Divakaruni’s novel it is intriguingly named “an antidote of love” (p.74), a designation that ties its physical sting to emotional cure.
- Fennel, a sweet, mild seed from the Mediterranean, refreshes breath, eases digestion, and steadies the mind. A small pinch after meals can relieve indigestion and build mental resolve; in the novel Tilo gives fennel to Ahuja’s young wife to bolster the mental strength she needs to face her husband’s troubling behavior.

- Ginger, the knobby rhizome prized across Asia, is famed for relighting the belly fire in Ayurvedic practice. Its warming, antiemetic and analgesic qualities make it a healing staple; in *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo drinks a hot ginger concoction herself and uses ginger's properties to relieve nausea, support immunity, and fortify the body.
- Black pepper, the peppercorn, is a dried fruit of a flowering vine that stimulates digestive secretions, soothes peptic ulcers, and helps fight infection. Divakaruni gives pepper a rhetorical function: it is the spice that can "sweat out" secrets. Tilo prescribes boiled pepper to Daksha, urging her to learn to say "No" and to find the voice to speak for herself—pepper as catalyst for speech and personal agency.
- Kalo jire (black cumin) is celebrated for its broad protective effects—cardiac support, blood-pressure regulation, anticancer potential, liver health, and weight management—yielding a general sense of wellbeing. Tilo scatters these seeds "for all who have suffered from America" (p.173), especially over Haroun, as a talisman of safety and restoration.
- Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), a cornerstone of South Asian pharmacopeia, offers immunomodulatory, anti-inflammatory, antihyperglycaemic, antibacterial, and anti-malarial properties. In the novel, Tilo uses neem paste for skin cleansing, disinfection, and beautification—a practical, everyday application of deep botanical knowledge.
- Red chilli, the fiery fruit of *Capsicum* species, is rich in vitamins A and C but can also scorch. Divakaruni treats it as a potent, elemental force—born of Agni, a cleanser of evil and a sign of danger. In the novel its origin from Lanka suggests epic power: chilli can destroy or purify, its heat a force to be respected.
- Makardhwaj, an Ayurvedic preparation combining herbal and mineral ingredients (historically including processed mercury), is described as an anti-aging, aphrodisiac, and fortifying remedy—one that should be taken only under strict supervision. Divakaruni casts Makardhwaj as "the conqueror of time," a substance Tilo uses in acts of beautifying and renewal.
- Lotus root for sustained passion; coriander (*dhania*) for clear sight and the purging of buried guilt when its infusion is drunk; amchur to revive taste and the love of life; mahimul root for fortune and protection against ill luck; tulsi (holy basil) as the humbler of ego and pacifier of craving for power; hartaki (*haritaki*) as a womb-shaped seed to ease birthing pains; and powdered almond with kesar boiled in milk to sweeten words and rekindle buried love. Sandalwood's cooling, soothing properties—calming the mind, easing pain, and improving skin—also find ritual and therapeutic uses in Tilo's practice.

Divakaruni's immersion in Ayurvedic lore—gathered from scholarship, local practitioners, and the folklore of Bengal—deeply informs the novel. She has acknowledged extensive research in the Bay Area and in family practices: spices were not only seasonings in her childhood but remedies and ritual agents, used to bring luck and ward off the evil eye (Seshachari; Neila 2001). This grounded knowledge enables her to render spices as active, morally inflected forces that shape identity and destiny in the diaspora.

Scholars have noted how this layering of mysticism, culinary knowledge, and feminist possibility produces an "exotic aesthetic" in which ancient wisdom and contemporary concerns meet. Inderpal Grewal argues that the novel sutures global cosmopolitanism with American

cultural feminism's spiritual translations, allowing non-Western goddess figures to become empowered agents; spices become instruments through which women resist patriarchal constraints (2005:77).

Divakaruni weaves ancient knowledge of spices and herbs into her narrative, adding a fresh layer to culinary fiction. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the remedial qualities of these botanicals animate them: spices become living presences that heal physical ailments and counter spiritual harms. As Divakaruni herself observes, spices do more than season food; they possess their own kind of magic and therapeutic power.

Good literature speaks across particularities to address shared human concerns. Diasporic writers, in particular, have honed an expressive craft that brings the textures of their native cultures into new worlds. Their stories do more than preserve tradition; they make cultural practices legible and useful to a wider audience. Art, therefore, serves life: a powerful work of literature can nourish understanding, heal divisions, and offer benefits that reach beyond any single community.

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