

The Spice Route to Self-Discovery: Cultural Reflections in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*

Dr Teddy C. Anthappai

Assistant Professor of English, St Berchmans College (Autonomous), Changanacherry,
Kerala

Abstract

Diasporic writers navigate their native cultures and share them with other parts of the world through their works, effectively bridging the gap between their homeland and their new environments. A decade ago, diasporic literature was often characterized by the nostalgic emotions of displaced individuals; however, it now presents a more positive portrayal of people who adapt to change with ease. These writers successfully establish connections between two cultures by negotiating within their new cultural spaces. The sense of homelessness and genuine pain experienced by immigrants has been alleviated through various social networking platforms. Diasporic authors utilize fiction as a medium to depict fictional characters in unfamiliar lands, confronting different challenges in diverse situations. Chitra Divakaruni, through her compelling narratives, captures pivotal moments in life and portrays dynamic characters that reflect the true essence of her homeland. In *Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni skilfully highlights the intrinsic qualities of spices and herbs, intertwining them with fictional elements that enhance the narrative. The novel serves as a conduit for showcasing the invaluable significance of Indian spices and herbs, along with their healing properties, to a global audience. Divakaruni artfully integrates Indian spices and herbs into the storyline of *Mistress of Spices*, aiming to globalize the importance of Ayurveda, an ancient therapeutic method deeply rooted in Indian culture.

Keywords: Culture, Diaspora, Herbs, Spices, Literature

In the past two decades, Indian diasporic writers have taken centre stage, largely due to the theoretical frameworks emerging from their works. They utilize their writing to create connections between their homeland and their new environments, engaging with the culture of their origin while also adapting to and negotiating the cultural landscape of their host country. The characters in their narratives often exist on the margins of two cultures, carving out a secure space in between. Although the sense of homelessness experienced by immigrants is genuine and profound, recent times have seen this pain lessened through social networking and a growing sense of solidarity among communities. Therefore, diasporic literature can be viewed as a body of work that fosters an understanding of diverse cultures, dismantles barriers between nations, promotes globalization, and contributes to the spread of universal peace.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent figure in diasporic literature, weaving the fabric of her fiction with elements of Indian culture to portray various aspects of Indian life,

such as food, clothing, rituals, language, and religious practices. Through her writing, she leaves a lasting impression of Indian culture on her readers. This study aims to highlight the invaluable knowledge of Indian spices and herbs for healing, which is a fundamental aspect of Indian culture. Divakaruni skilfully incorporates this ancient wisdom of Ayurveda into *The Mistress of Spices*. Her connection to Indian culture is deeply ingrained in her identity as an immigrant writer, and this affinity for her roots is evident in her works. She actively promotes her Indian heritage in her writings, showcasing valuable aspects of her homeland. As an ambassador of her culture, Divakaruni enhances its understanding among readers. Culture encompasses the social behaviours and norms found within human societies; it represents the way of life for a group of people—their beliefs, values, and symbols that are typically accepted without question and passed down through generations. Individuals live according to the norms inherited from their ancestors, benefiting from the ancient knowledge contained in their sacred texts. The profound knowledge of Indian Ayurveda and its globally recognized healing properties are beautifully documented and presented in *The Mistress of Spices*, making it accessible to a broad audience. The novel serves as a medium to convey the significant value of Indian spices and their healing attributes to the world. While India is globally recognized for its mysticism and yogic traditions, this novel adds a new dimension to its image by imparting deep insights into Ayurveda. India stands out for its unity in diversity and is renowned for its contributions across various fields, including science, mathematics, medicine, technology, astronomy, and cuisine. Through literature, these rich cultural insights become accessible to a wider audience. Divakaruni draws from the depths of her imagination and memory to present unique perspectives on her homeland through this narrative.

The story of *The Mistress of Spices* centers on Tilo and her remarkable ability to utilize spices. Born as Nayan Tara, meaning "star seer," she is an unwanted child in a poor family in South India, where her birth is seen as a burden. Left to wander the village unattended, her parents eventually recognize her unique gift of foresight. Tilo can see things others cannot, helping people locate lost items and foretelling dangers and disasters. As her reputation spreads, pirates raid her village and abduct her, exploiting her talent for their gain and renaming her Bhagyavati, meaning "bringer of good fortune." Tilo manages to escape with the help of serpents and reaches an island where she meets an ageless woman known as the Old One. The girls on the island refer to her as "the first mother." This wise woman teaches them various arts, including how to harness the healing properties of spices. Tilo excels in her training and, upon completion, chooses her own name and decides to become the "mistress" of spices in Oakland. While the Old One is pleased with Tilo's choice, she expresses concern about Tilo's rebellious and impatient nature. She instructs Tilo to adhere to certain rules as a spice healer: not to pry into others' lives, not to touch them, not to leave the store, and not to use her powers for personal gain. After undergoing the purification of Shampati's fire, Tilo transforms into an old woman's body, gaining a new identity as a magical woman capable of extraordinary feats with spices. Concealing her true self beneath the guise of an arthritic old body, she relocates to Oakland to operate her "Spice Bazar."

The plot of *The Mistress of Spices* is intricately woven and captivates readers from the very beginning, thanks to the metonymic titles of each chapter that hint at the distinctive qualities, origins, and powers of spices. Divakaruni emphasizes the significance of spices not only in culinary terms but also in their ability to address both physical and mental challenges faced by individuals. Tilo, the spice healer, treats customers who visit her store, guided by her mentor, the Old One, who teaches her that "different spices may help us with different troubles, and for each person, there is one special spice" (71). For instance, she applies sandalwood powder to Haroun's palm to alleviate his haunting memories and offers black pepper to Daksha to empower her to assertively say 'no' to her patriarchal family. She provides Kesar and almond powder to Gita's grandfather to sweeten their words and thoughts, while lotus root powder is given to Hameeda to enhance love. This unique relationship between spices and human experiences, along with their connections to Hindu mythology, lends a magical quality to the novel. The author portrays spices as non-human characters endowed with supernatural abilities.

The first chapter of *The Mistress of Spices* is titled "Tilo," a name derived from "Til," and the subsequent thirteen chapters are named after various spices: Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, Ginger, Peppercorn, Kalo Jire, Neem, Red Chilli, Makardwaj, Lotus Root, and Sesame. In an interview with UCTV, Divakaruni discussed the significance of spices in the novel, stating:

The spices are very important in this book; as characters, they have personalities of their own. Different sections of the novel are named after them, and these are the parts where they play a crucial role, developing a relationship with Tilo and expressing their love and anger. (Divakaruni)

Through this work, Divakaruni remains connected to her roots while aiming to globalize the significance of Ayurveda, an ancient therapeutic method associated with Indian culture. She portrays her protagonist, Tilo, as a spice healer with extensive knowledge of Indian spices. Tilo has "every Indian spice" available on the shelves of her store.

The spices are my love. . . They are the ones I work with . . . every Indian spice that ever was - even the lost one's - gathered here upon the shelves of my store...I say there is no other place in the world quite like this. (04)

The narrative of *The Mistress of Spices* centres on Tilo, who hails from the "land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers." She possesses an intricate understanding of spices, knowing their implications and uses. Tilo states, "I know their origins, and what their colours signify and their smells. I can call each by their true name, given when the earth splits like skin and offers it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood; they bow to my command. At a whisper, they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magical powers... you have forgotten the old secrets..." The Indian subcontinent has long been recognized as a "land of spices." Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an author from India, skilfully incorporates a variety of Indian spices that not only flavour, colour, and preserve food but also possess medicinal and healing properties. The inherent qualities of these spices are seamlessly integrated with fictional elements that enhance the narrative. For instance, turmeric, known scientifically as *Curcuma longa* and derived from the Arabic word "kurkum," is referred to as "Haridhara" (the golden one) in Sanskrit. It is highly valued for its healing abilities, preservation qualities,

and spiritual significance. Turmeric's vibrant yellow hue symbolizes the "colour of daybreak" and is traditionally used in various rituals—it is placed on the heads of new-borns for luck, sprinkled over coconuts during puja ceremonies, and rubbed into the borders of new wedding saris. Its rich properties include skin benefits; when applied topically, it can erase blemishes and wrinkles, imparting a pale golden glow. Tilo uses turmeric to heal her customers' wounds and keeps turmeric powder in Lalita's bag along with some prayers to aid her in her suffering.

Cinnamon, or Dalchini, is a pleasantly aromatic mid-brown spice derived from the inner bark of the *Cinnamomum* tree. It is not only a delightful flavoring agent but also a powerful medicinal plant. Cinnamon has been shown to improve serum glucose levels, lower fasting blood glucose, and reduce triglycerides, making it beneficial for diabetics. Tilo tucks a cinnamon stick into Jagjit's turban to help him make friends at school and to gain strength. She wishes for him to be a "destroyer of enemies" to give him strength that "grows in your legs and arms and mostly mouth until one day you shout 'no' loud enough to make them stop" (40, MOS).

Fenugreek is a small annual plant characterized by its three small oblong leaflets. Both its leaves and seeds are used as aromatic spices and for their healing properties. Fenugreek seeds contain antioxidants and essential nutrients. Legend has it that Shabari, the oldest woman in the world, was the first to sow these small speckled seeds. Although they have a bitter taste, they render the body sweet again, preparing it for love. Tilo uses fenugreek to treat Ratna, who suffers from poison in her womb, and Binita, who has breast cancer.

Asafoetida is a hard resinous gum spice with a sulfurous, onion-like smell, obtained from the root-stock of the *Ferula asafoetida* plant. The name "Ferula" means carrier; "as" refers to resin; and "felid" denotes its offensive odor. This spice holds significant medicinal value and is used for conditions such as hysteria, loss of appetite, ulcers, flatulence, and respiratory disorders due to its pungent aroma. In *The Mistress of Spices*, it is described as "an antidote of love" (74, MOS).

Fennel is a mildly flavoured sweet aromatic seed spice from the Mediterranean region. It can relieve ailments such as anaemia, indigestion, and respiratory disorders when taken in small amounts after meals; it also freshens breath and aids digestion. Fennel provides mental strength for necessary tasks and helps cool tempers while improving brain function. Tilo gives fennel to Ahuja's young wife, who desperately needs mental fortitude due to Ahuja's troubling behaviour.

Ginger, known for its unique flavour and medicinal properties, is derived from the underground, palmately digitate rhizomes of an herbaceous perennial plant. Golden ginger is utilized by the healer Charak to reignite the digestive fire. This Asian spice is particularly effective in relieving nausea and pain, making it a common remedy that Tilo, the healer, consumes herself as a hot concoction. Additionally, ginger promotes bone health and strengthens the immune system.

Black pepper, or peppercorn, is a flowering vine cultivated for its dried fruits, which serve as both a spice for seasoning and for medicinal purposes. It aids digestion by stimulating the secretion of digestive juices and enzymes, alleviates peptic ulcers, relieves

cold and cough symptoms, combats infections, and enhances perspiration. Black pepper also possesses antioxidant properties. In *The Mistress of Spices*, it is used to uncover hidden desires, as it can "sweat secrets" from individuals. Tilo provides this spice to Daksha, instructing her to boil it and drink it to learn how to assert herself and say 'no,' a challenge many Indian women face.

Kalo Jire, or black cumin seeds, offer numerous health benefits, including protection against various diseases. They promote heart health, help control high blood pressure, fight cancer, support liver function, and assist in weight loss—contributing to overall well-being. This may explain why Tilo sprinkles these seeds “for all who have suffered from America” (173), particularly for Haroun's safety.

Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), a tree native to the Indian subcontinent, is renowned worldwide for its medicinal properties. Virtually all parts of the neem tree are utilized for healing. The leaves exhibit immunomodulatory, anti-inflammatory, antihyperglycemic, anti-ulcer, anti-malarial, and antibacterial effects. Tilo uses a paste made from neem leaves on her skin to cleanse, disinfect, and enhance her beauty.

Red chili peppers are fruits of the capsicum plant and are rich in vitamins A and C. While they can cause a burning sensation when consumed in excess, Divakaruni portrays this spice as extremely potent with destructive power; it is said to have the potential to devastate an entire city due to its origins in Lanka—a symbol of danger. Born from Agni (the god of fire), red chili serves as a cleanser of evil.

Makaradwaj is an Ayurvedic medicine composed of herbal and mineral ingredients, also known as sulfide of mercury. It must be taken under strict medical supervision due to potential risks associated with self-medication. Makaradwaj is valued for its anti-aging properties and aphrodisiac effects; it enhances heart strength and boosts immunity. Divakaruni refers to it as the "conqueror of time," and Tilo uses it to beautify herself.

Lotus root is believed to promote a long and passionate love life. Dhania or coriander seeds are used for improving vision; soaking them in water helps purge old guilt. Amchur is employed to revive taste buds and rekindle a love for life. Mahamul is a root spice used to enhance fortune, bring joy, and avert misfortune. Tulsi (basil) symbolizes humility; it curbs ego and redirects thoughts inward away from worldly desires. Hartuki is a shriveled seed shaped like a womb that assists mothers in enduring childbirth pain. An astringent leaf that dries dark on the stem helps reduce mistrust and greed. A mixture of almond powder and kesar (saffron) boiled in milk serves to sweeten words and thoughts at bedtime while helping one remember love buried beneath anger. Lastly, sandalwood is known for its cooling properties; it soothes the mind, alleviates pain, and benefits the skin.

I have been interested in the traditional ancient Hindu system of medicine, for a long time so I did a lot of ayurvedic research as well. At Berkeley and in the Bay area, there are a lot of ayurvedic practitioners and you can get a lot of books as well. So I did do a lot of Ayurvedic research. Some of it came out of, again, the folklore of Bengal, the ways in which spices were used in my home when I was growing up, not for cooking but for medicinal purposes. There are some good luck spices. You have certain ceremonies where you would use

certain spices to bring good luck and avert the evil eye—the mustard seed to avert the evil eye and the haldi, which is auspicious. (Seshachari, Neila, 2001)

The in-depth exploration of spices enables Divakaruni to depict her characters as both magical and resilient. Inderpal Grewal describes *The Mistress of Spices* as “an exotic aesthetic” that intertwines Hindu mysticism and ancient wisdom associated with India throughout history. He comments on the role of spices in the novel, stating:

This narrative of ancient and modern [...] sutures the world of late twentieth-century cosmopolitan travel and cuisine with American cultural feminism’s new translational spiritualities that enable non-Western goddess. Exotic power is empowerment, and feminism and exoticism are first demarcated and reconciled. Exotic spices enable women to become feminist subjects by using their magical and healing qualities to fight patriarchal Indian traditions. (2005:77)

Divakaruni weaves age-old knowledge of spices and herbs into her story, adding a new dimension to culinary fiction. In *The Mistress of Spices*, her portrayal of the healing properties of spices and herbs imbues them with life-like qualities. As she states, “The spices are used for more than flavourings. They have magical power in their own right, providing remedies for physical ailments as well as cures for spiritual ills. “Literature is powerful because of its universality; it transcends specific societies or communities and speaks to all of humanity. Diasporic writers have developed a unique flair for expression, showcasing the diverse and positive aspects of their native cultures through their narratives. Art serves not only for art’s sake but also for life’s sake, and a well-crafted piece of literature fulfils this purpose, benefiting the entire world.

The Mistress of Spices transports readers into a realm where food transcends its ordinary purpose, evolving into a catalyst for healing and transformation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narrative skillfully reveals the magical realism embedded in culinary experiences, showcasing the significant influence that food has on human lives. Ultimately, the novel highlights the complex interplay between spices, personal identity, and the nuanced 'politics' of individual stories, encouraging reflection on the diverse roles food plays and its lasting importance in our existence.

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