

## The Intersection of Myth, Medicine, and Spices in the Mistress of Spices

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### Abstract

Diasporic writers create a connection between their new home and their country by bringing their native culture to other parts of the world through their writing. Although diasporic literature used to mostly focus on the nostalgic feelings of homeless people, it now portrays a more positive and diverse image of individuals who are able to adjust to change with ease. They successfully negotiate the new cultural space and build a relationship between two civilizations. Various social networking platforms have decreased the sensation of homelessness and real agony that every immigrant experiences. Because it gives them a lot of room to depict their fictitious characters in new places dealing with various issues in various circumstances, diasporic authors use fiction. Chitra Divakaruni captures life's pivotal events and embodies a vibrant character that reflects the authentic culture of her native country via her compelling storytelling. In a masterful way, Divakaruni mixes the fictitious components that support the plot with the general attributes of the spices and herbs. The Mistress of Spices serves as a conduit for spreading awareness of the world's healing potential and the priceless worth of Indian herbs and spices. Divakaruni attempts to spread awareness of the importance of this age-old Ayurvedic treatment, which is closely linked to Indian culture, by skillfully combining Indian spices and herbs in The Mistress of Spices.

**Keywords:** diasporic literature, Indian culture, The Mistress of Spices, Ayurvedic healing, spices, immigrant experience, cultural negotiation, identity, Indian herbs

The main reason Indian Diasporic writers have been in the spotlight over the past 20 years is the theoretical framework that their writings have produced. They have been bridging the gap between their new home and their homeland through their labor. In addition to adopting and negotiating the artistic environment of the host country, they write in respect to their native culture. The protagonists in their works inhabit the boundaries of two civilizations and establish a safe haven in the middle. Although the emotion of homelessness that every immigrant experiences is real and severe, it has been seen in recent years that social networking and a sense of community have lessened and even eliminated this suffering.

The Diasporic Indian is "like a banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up," as Bhikhu Parekh

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so eloquently illustrates. He has multiple homes and is not homeless, which is the sole reason he feels more and more at home in the world. (106).

Therefore, from a wider angle, diasporic literature can be viewed as a way to better understand different cultures, dismantle national boundaries, globalize the world, and even promote world peace.

In Diasporic writing, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known figure. She successfully creates a lasting imprint of Indian culture in the reader's mind by weaving the thread of Indian culture throughout her fiction to depict various facets of Indian life, such as cuisine, attire, traditions, language, and religious activities. This study attempts to emphasize the invaluable knowledge of Indian herbs and spices for medicinal purposes, which is a fundamental aspect of Indian culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni deftly employs this age-old and priceless knowledge of Indian Ayurveda in *The Mistress of Spices*.

Immigrant writers have a strong connection to Indian culture, and Divakaruni is no exception. She has a strong connection to her heritage, and her passion for her home country is evident in her artwork. In her writings, she attempts to portray some positive aspects of her home country while promoting her Indian culture. As an ambassador, she helps to make her culture more understandable by projecting it.

Human cultures' social rules and conduct are referred to as their culture. It is a group of people's way of life—the values, beliefs, and symbols that they embrace, usually without question, and that are passed down from one generation to the next. People follow the rules that were established by their forefathers and profit from the old wisdom found in their sacred texts. Understanding Indian Ayurveda is extremely deep, and its therapeutic benefits are widely acknowledged. The majority of readers will be able to understand the excellent and impressive way in which this knowledge is documented and presented in this story.

*Mistress of Spices* serves as a platform to inform people worldwide about the medicinal benefits and priceless worth of Indian spices. Even though India is renowned around the world for its yogic culture and mysticism, this book gives it a new perspective by sharing the profound understanding of Ayurveda. India is a wonderful nation that is renowned for its diversity and unity. This nation is distinguished by its expertise in astronomy, technology, medicine, mathematics, science, food, and many other fields.

Furthermore, literature serves as a medium for making all of this available to the general public. Through this story, Divakaruni explores the vast depths of her memory and imagination to unearth some special and unusual pearls that paint a new picture of her homeland.

*The Mistress of Spices* is centered on Tilo's life and her talent at using spices. Her name is Nayan Tara, which means "star seer." She was born into a destitute household in south India as an unwanted kid. Her parents view her birth as an inconvenience. She spends the entire day in the village wandering

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alone. As she gets older, her parents become aware of her unique ability to predict the future. Her ability to see things that others cannot allows her to assist others in finding misplaced items. She is also able to foretell disasters and threats. As her reputation grows, her town is attacked by sea pirates, who take her with them. Because of her ability to predict the future, they acquire additional treasure and refer to her as Bhagyavati, or the harbinger of good fortune. She uses snakes to assist her get out from their grasp and arrives at an island. There, she befriends an elderly woman who is timeless and becomes one of her students. The elderly woman there is referred to by all of the girls as "the old one" or "the first mother." This elderly woman instructs girls in various forms of art. The elder teaches Nayantara the technique of managing spices and their therapeutic properties. She picks things up far faster than any of the other girls on that island. The "Old One" gives each lady a new name after they have finished their training and gives them a duty that fits their personalities. The older one also asks them to pick a workplace. Nayantara decides on Tilo as her own identity and decides to be the "mistress" of spices in Oakland. Because Tilo is naturally disobedient and impatient, the Old One is both pleased for her and concerned. She informs Tilo that after assuming the duty of a spice healer, she must abide by certain regulations. She shouldn't touch other people, inquire into their lives, leave the store, or utilize the power of spices for her personal ends, according to the Old One. Following his journey through the Shampati's fire, Tilo transforms into an elderly woman. She acquires a new identity as a magical woman who can do miracles with spices. She travels to Oakland to operate her "Spice Bazar," but her true nature is hidden under the mask of an arthritic elderly body.

The Mistress of Spices has a tight plot that draws readers in right away because to the metonymic titles of each chapter, which allude to the general characteristics of spices, their origins, their abilities, and how they are used in the text. While outlining the significance of spices, Divakaruni also discusses how they can help people with both mental and physical issues. Visitors are treated by Tilo, the spice healer, at her shop. She has learned from her tutor, Old One, that "each person has a special spice, and different spices may help us with different troubles." Page 71 Tilo relieves Haroun's eerie memories by rubbing sandalwood powder onto his palm. To help Daksha be firm in saying "no" to her patriarchal family, she also offers her a black pepper spice. The lotus root powder she provides Hameeda enhances love, while the almond powder she offers Kesar and Gita's grandfather sweetens their thoughts and words. A magical touch is added to the tale by the special relationship that spices have with human lives and Hindu mythology. Spices are portrayed by the author as supernaturally endowed non-human characters.

The title "Tilo," which comes from the word "til," is the first chapter. The remaining thirteen chapters are titled "Turmeric," "Cinnamon," "Fenugreek," "Asafoetida," "Fennel," "Ginger," "Peppercorn," "KaloJire," "Neem," "Red Chilli," "Makardwaj," "Lotus Root," and "Sesame." In an interview with UCTV, Divakaruni explained the importance of spices in the book, saying, "The spices are very important in this book, as characters they have personalities of their own, different sections of novels are named after them, these are the sections where they play an important part, and they develop a relationship with Tilo and speak to her, show their love and anger." (Divakaruni).

Divakaruni never abandons her roots, and via this work, she attempts to spread awareness of the

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importance of the age-old Indian cultural treatment practice known as Ayurveda. Because Tilo has a keen understanding of Indian spices, Divakaruni has presented her as a spice healer. The novel's protagonist, Tilo, has "every Indian spice" (03) on her store shelves.

"My dear, the spices are...They are the ones that I deal with. All of the Indian spices, even the ones that have been lost, are concentrated on the shelves of my store. There is nowhere else like this in the world, in my opinion. (04).

The "land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers" is where Tilo hails from. (03) She understands the meaning and use of each spice.

I am familiar with their origins, as well as the meanings behind their colors and scents. At the beginning, when the earth split like skin and offered it to the sky, I was able to address each by their true name. They obey my orders, and I feel their fire. They reveal to me their magic abilities and hidden traits with a whisper. You have lost the ancient mysteries. (03).

For a long time, the Indian subcontinent was known as the "land of spices." Indian-born novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has deftly acquired a range of Indian spices that are utilized for their therapeutic and restorative qualities in addition to their ability to flavor, color, or preserve food. In order to further the plot, the fictional components are combined with the generic characteristics of the spices.

**Curcuma Longa**, which is derived from the Arabic term Kurkum, is the Latin name for turmeric. The Sanskrit term for it is "Haridhara," which means "the golden one." For its ability to heal, preserve, and have spiritual aspects, turmeric is highly prized. As the "colour of daybreak," turmeric, also known as Halud, is yellow and is applied to newborns' heads for good fortune. It is also dusted over coconuts during puja and rubbed into the edges of new and even bridal saris. It has many benefits, including as "eliminating wrinkles and blemishes, sucking away fat and age, and giving the skin a pale golden glow" when used topically. Turmeric is used by Tilo to treat her clients' wounds. She keeps some prayer phrases and turmeric powder in Lalita's bag to ease her agony.

A delightfully smelling mid-brown spice, **cinnamon**, sometimes known as Dalchini, is extracted from the inner bark of the Cinnamomum tree. It is a fantastic medicinal herb. It helps diabetics by lowering triglycerides, improving serum glucose, and lowering fasting blood glucose. Tilo puts a cinnamon stick in Jagjit's turban to help him become stronger and make friends at school. He should be a "destroyer of enemies to give you strength, strength which grows in your legs and arms and mostly in your mouth until one day you shout 'no' loud enough to make them, shocked, stop" (40, MOS), according to her.

Three tiny oblong leaflets make up the leaves of the tiny, annual **fenugreek** plant. Both the leaves and seeds are used as a spice and as a medicinal herb. Strong nutrients and antioxidants are present. The oldest woman in the world, Shabari, was the one who initially planted the tiny, speckled seed. It makes the body pleasant again, ready for love, yet it tastes bitter. Ratna, who was poisoned in her

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womb, and Binita, who had breast cancer, were both cured by Tilo using this spice.

The hard, resinous, sulfurous gum spice known as **asafoetida** is made from the root stock of the *Ferula asafoetida* plant. "Ferula" means carrier, "as" means resin, and "felid" indicates aggressive. It is quite important from a medical standpoint. It is used to treat hysteria, ulcers, flatulence, respiratory diseases, loss of appetite, and anti-helminthic activity—likely due to its unpleasant, strong odor. The phrase "an antidote of love" (74, MOS) is used in *The Mistress of Spices*.

Mediterranean **fennel** is a sweet, aromatic seed spice with a mild flavor. If eaten after each meal, it helps with respiratory diseases, anemia, and indigestion. It also helps with indigestion and freshens breath. It provides mental fortitude to accomplish the necessary tasks. It even soothes irritability. It also helps the brain work better. Tilo provides fennel to Ahuja's young wife, who is in desperate need of mental fortitude due to Ahuja's inappropriate actions.

The herbaceous perennial plant's subterranean, palmately digitate rhizomes are used to make **ginger** spice. Healer Charak uses golden ginger to rekindle the belly fire. Since it is an Asian spice with a special capacity to alleviate pain and nausea, the healer (Tilo) herself takes it as a hot mixture. Additionally, it boosts immunity and improves bone health.

The flowering vine known as **black pepper, or peppercorn**, is grown for its dried fruits, which are used as a spice, condiment, and medicine. It treats peptic ulcers and aids in better digestion by promoting the release of digestive juices and enzymes. It also helps with coughing and colds, fights infections, and increases sweating. Additionally, it possesses antioxidant qualities. Since it may be used to extract secrets from you, it is employed in *The Mistress of Spices* to help you understand Native Americans' hidden desires. Daksha receives this spice from Tilo, who advises her to boil it, drink it, and practice saying "no" and standing up for herself—two things that Indian women find extremely difficult.

**Black cumin or kalo jire** seeds are superb for shielding our bodies from a wide range of illnesses. It prevents cancer, lowers blood pressure, maintains a healthy liver, protects our heart, and aids in weight loss. In general, it promotes a state of overall health. Tilo most likely sprayed the seeds "for all who have suffered from America" (173), and specifically for Haroun's safety.

Native to the Indian subcontinent, **neem** (*Azadirachta indica*) is a tree that is well-known around the world for its therapeutic qualities. Almost all of its components are employed in medicine. Immunomodulatory, anti-inflammatory, antihyperglycemic, antiulcer, antimalarial, and antibacterial qualities have been shown for the leaves. To cleanse, sanitize, and beautify her skin, Tilo applies neem leaf paste.

A member of the potato family, **red chilli** is a fruit of the capsicum plant and a good source of vitamins A and C. When this spice is used excessively, it might burn. This spice has been employed by Divakaruni because it is quite powerful. As a warning sign from Lanka, it has the ability to completely destroy the city. It was born of the god of fire, Agni, and is the purifier of evil.

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Sulfide of Mercury is another name for **makaradwaj**, an Ayurvedic medication made of herbal and mineral elements. Due to the potential risks of self-medication, this should only be used under close medical care. This amazing medicine is used to treat aphrodisia and anti-aging. It increases immunity and cardiac strength. According to Divakaruni, Makardwaj is the conqueror of time. It's the spice that Tilo uses to make herself look more attractive.

**Lotus** root promotes a long, passionate romantic life. To clear sight, use coriander seed, also known as **dhania**. You can get rid of previous guilts by soaking it and drinking the water. **Amchur** is utilized to restore life's love and rejuvenate the taste senses. Known as the root spice, **mahmul** is said to improve luck, create happiness, and prevent bad luck.

The basil plant of humility is **tulsi**. Ego is cured by it. In addition to turning the mind inward and away from worldliness, it quenches the desire for power. **Hartuki**, a shriveled seed shaped like a womb, alleviates the agony that new moms experience during childbirth. An astringent leaf that has been darkly dried on the stem is used to lessen greed and mistrust. **Almond** and **kesar** powder should be boiled in milk and consumed before bed to sweeten your thoughts and words and to remind you of the love that lies behind the rage. **Sandalwood's** ability to chill is well-known. It is beneficial for the skin and is used to calm the mind and forget about pain.

In her book, Divakaruni integrates all of the knowledge she has gained from her extensive research on Ayurveda. She states in one of her interviews: "I conducted extensive research on ayurveda since I have long been interested in the traditional, old Hindu medical system. There are many ayurveda practitioners in Berkeley and the Bay area, and there are also many books available. I therefore conducted a great deal of Ayurvedic research. Part of it originated from Bengali tradition, which describes how spices were utilized in my family during my childhood—not for cooking, but for medical purposes. Some spices are lucky charms. In certain rituals, you would use specific spices to bring good fortune and ward off bad luck. For example, you would use mustard seeds to ward off bad luck and haldi, which is considered auspicious. Neila Seshachari (2001)

Divakaruni has been able to portray her characters' identities as powerful and magical thanks to her in-depth study of spices. Additionally, Inderpal Grewal considers *The Mistress of Spices* to have "an exotic aesthetic" that combines Hindu mysticism and age-old knowledge with India's longstanding association. "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 nonwestern goddess," he says in reference to the novel's use of spices. Feminism and exoticism must first be distinguished and made to work together. Exotic power is empowerment. By utilizing their therapeutic and magical properties to combat patriarchal Indian customs, exotic spices empower women to become feminist subjects (2005:77).

In order to bring a fresh element to the flavor of culinary fiction, Divakaruni incorporates the ancient knowledge of spices and herbs into this novel. (1997). In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni gives the spices a living personality by using their therapeutic qualities to alleviate human suffering. "The

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spices are used for more than just flavorings," the author states. They possess their own magical abilities and offer both curses for spiritual evils and cures for physical ailments.

The universality of literature makes it wonderful. It is for the entire human race and does not address any one society or community. Diasporic authors have a talent for storytelling and showcase various positive aspects of their home culture in their amazing tales. A good work of literature will achieve this goal and help the entire world. Art is not just for the sake of art; it is also for the sake of life.

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