



Spices as Cultural Memory: Pain, Ritual, and Diasporic Belonging in *The Mistress of Spices*

Prabhat Kumar
PhD Research Scholar
Department of English
Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Bihar

Abstract

This paper examines how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her novel *The Mistress of Spices*, presents spices as a medium of cultural memory that helps the Indian diaspora manage suffering, rituals, and belonging in the United States. In Divakaruni's magical-realistic universe, spices are alive, helping people remember their birthplace, pass down wisdom through their bodies, and cope with migration's mental and physical impacts. Yet these mediations exact costs: Tilo's body bears her customers' agony, while rituals preserving memory demand gendered discipline and sacrifice. Utilising cultural memory, diaspora studies, sensory anthropology, and feminist literary criticism, this study argues that spices function as mnemonic devices beyond ornamental ethnic symbols. Spices thus represent collective sorrow, ancestral memories, and ethical duty. Divakaruni demonstrates that diaspora is not a fixed state but a continual, sensory negotiation through narrative, gendered, and ritual practices that transmute suffering into caring connections.

Keywords: cultural memory, diaspora, spices, pain, ritual, belonging, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is an important book in modern Indian diaspora writing. Divakaruni uses magical realism to present what it's like to be an immigrant in the United States. She depicts the challenges that people from other cultures have when they come to a new country, the necessity to protect their culture, the discrimination against people of colour, and the unique problems that Indian women experience when they are in a multicultural situation. Tilo, the protagonist, is an Indian woman who learned about spices on an island named Spice Island. She runs a spice shop in Oakland, where she uses her wide understanding of spices to help many various immigrants with their mental and physical health problems. As Panda and Mohanty observe, "Tilo, with the help of magical spices and her genuine will, is able to find a resolution to the conflicts of everyone" (Panda and Mohanty). Sharma and Mehta further elaborate on this connection:

In her renowned literary piece, 'Mistress of Spices' (1997), Divakaruni has plotted out the connection of the émigré protagonist Tilottama (Tilo), who uses her magical powers to converse with spices, which form the biotic component of the earth, to solve the mundane issues of other immigrants. Tilo acts as a connecting link between diasporas and homeland through the medium of nature and environment, which is the underlining attribute of all the living and non-living survivals in this sphere. (Sharma and Mehta)

Many scholars associate spices and culinary traditions with the preservation of diasporic culture, indicating that they serve to connect individuals to India's cultural history while navigating new environments. Avtar Brah's notions of "home" and "diaspora space" enable discussions of belonging, whilst Elaine Scarry's analysis of pain demonstrates how the novel portrays both physical and psychological injuries as forces that alter and challenge language, ritual, and community. As Agarwal and Kapil summarise,

"The protagonist Tilo's role as a healer, reformer and as a bridge between two distinct cultures can be summarized in the words of Divakaruni who in her essay entitled 'Dissolving Boundaries', depicts that, 'For me, Tilo became the quintessential dissolver of boundaries, moving between different ages and worlds and the communities that people them, passing through a trial by water, then a trial by fire, and finally the trial of earth-burial to emerge transformed, each time with a new name and a new identity'" (Agarwal and Kapil).

Theoretical Framework for Cultural Memory, Diaspora, and Suffering

Jan Assmann characterises cultural memory as a communal recollection that persists beyond the duration of individual generations. Some of the "external symbols" that keep it alive are rituals, images, poems, and physical things that can be used over and over again. Assmann explains plainly that "dishes, feasts, rites, images, stories, and other texts" are spaces of remembering where cultural meaning is contributed and exchanged.

Nora asserts that these locations emerge when "living memory" diminishes, necessitating that societies depend on monuments, texts, and rituals to maintain a tenuous sense of continuity. Nora's research concentrates on French national memory; but, later academics have expanded his notion of mnemonic sites to include diasporic and postcolonial contexts, where memory "places" may vary from kitchens to religious festivals to olfactory and gustatory experiences.

Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* overcomes the basic dichotomy of homeland and hostland in diaspora discourse. It focuses on "diaspora space" as the place where different kinds of people—migrants and non-migrants, colonisers and the colonized—come together. Brah makes a distinction between "homeland," which is an idealised, nationally influenced conception, and "home," which is where daily living happens, family ties are strong, and feelings of "being at home" are strong. Divakaruni's novel shows this contradiction in both home and food settings. As Divakaruni writes in the voice of Tilo: "Sometimes it feels me with a heaviness, lake of black ice, when I think that across the entire length of this land not one person knows who I am." (Divakaruni 5)

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* endeavours to elucidate pain as an experience that requires both demonstration and non-demonstration. Scarry adds that intense physical pain "not only defies language but also obliterates it," leaving the individual in anguish with just cries and groans that reveal how far they can go in expressing themselves. Subsequent observers have observed that Scarry's paradigm highlights the isolating and destructive aspects of suffering, while concurrently facilitating an analysis of how cultural manifestations, including art, ritual, and narrative, strive to reconstruct language in the aftermath of such destruction.

This study utilises these frameworks to examine spices in *The Mistress of Spices* as cultural-memory artefacts that function as diaspora-specific sites of remembrance and as tools within economies of care focused on pain and healing. In this scenario, the pain isn't just bodily; it's also racial, gendered, and economic. Spices help you deal with these challenges and show them in a way that makes sense in a common tale and ritual structure. As Krishna S notes:

Notably, while Tilo upholds the mystical powers and tradition of India that in turn grant her supernatural abilities as a healer and a nurturer, ironically, it is these powers that entrap her under stringent gender norms emanating from traditional Indian value-systems. Likewise, while America bestows upon her the independence and autonomy to run a spice shop, it nevertheless exoticizes her. Tilo, the magical healer, therefore, inhabits a liminal space between the east and the west where she constantly negotiates with cultural codes in order to attain autonomy and identity. (Krishna S)

Spices as Sensual Records of Home

Researchers studying Indian diaspora cuisine have shown that for many migrants, herbs and spices are closely connected to language, religion, gender roles, and cultural identity. In the host society, these are often the key sites where "gastronomic preservation" happens. Divakaruni herself anchors the novel's sensory world in the spices of the homeland, as Tilo declares: "But the spices of true power are from my birthland, the land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood" (Divakaruni 3). Divakaruni's novel brings these old characters to life and makes them greater by giving spices their own minds and almost godlike abilities. There are stories and abilities from Indian culture for each spice in *The Mistress of Spices*. For example, turmeric protects, red chilli makes individuals bold or want something, and asafoetida helps them stop doing things they used to do. The spices talk to Tilo and instruct her how to make her customers' lives better while yet keeping their Indian culture alive through their names, fragrances, and ceremonial uses. As Sharma and Mehta detail:

Tilottama is the proprietor of 'Spice Bazaar' in Oakland, California. She harnesses the magical powers of the Indian spices in her store, helps her customers regulate their lives, and helps them solve their day-to-day immigrant issues. The seasonings are handled as characters in the narrative by Divakaruni. The spices act as 'flat characters' because they remain unaffected, unaltered, and steady throughout the novel. The spices bend to her authority, show their magical powers and strength. A variety of Indian spices are found in Tilo's SPICE BAZAAR, and when arranged in her palm, the spices communicate to her and guide the mistress at vital hours. (Sharma and Mehta)

Alam offers a compelling reading of this dynamic:

Given a range of choices we can make for our reading of this novel, the plot of Divakaruni's novel can be read as an allegory of a woman's sensorial journey through patriarchal and hierarchical order to the point of her attempt to attain autonomy. Tilo's inheritance of mysterious power allows her to travel in an old woman's body through time and arrive at her chosen place Oakland, California. From her spice shop there, she serves the needs of people by discerning the sensorial qualities of different spices and their applicability to solving the problems of people. The story, therefore, is embedded in the power of multisensorial experiences from which we can make a strong case for understanding the deeply held prejudices of associating women with some "lower" senses. (Alam)

The paper looks at spices as "places of memory" that "collapse distances." For example, a pinch of turmeric brings back memories of family protective rituals, while the smell of cardamom brings back memories of evenings spent in a mother's kitchen for students who are homesick. These results bolster Assmann's claim that cultural memory is "anchored" in dietary habits, rituals, and myths that cultures attribute meaning to and subsequently recontextualise. As Sibtain Beg observes,

"Tilo runs the spice store and recreates a small India around her and all the immigrants come to her to share their problems, pain, and predicament and get remedy of their ailment finding

her store their other home. Her store serves them an oasis in a cultural desert. Tilo is generous and genial spirit who creates a hallowed halo hovering around Indian immigrants. She tries her best to assuage pain of immigrants either by procuring spices to them or to give balm to their trauma" (Sibtain Beg).

People go to Tilo's store in the book with problems such as troubles with their marriage, racial harassment, or money. But the anecdote always reveals how the smell or feel of a spice can bring back a memory that was lost. The smell of cardamom and ghee makes a young man think about spending time in an Indian kitchen at night. This enables him convey how homesick he feels in a way that he can't say in public in the US. Some spice mixes make older immigrants think of religious holidays, kitchens for certain castes, or the partition and migration. The spices don't use words to tell stories; they use taste, smell, and touch. Alam further elaborates on this tension through the figure of Tilo:

The text also allows us to see Tilo's transgression as her overturning of the popular ideas of the witch identity in which the "magical" power of femininity is expected to operate under certain rules. She, in a complex way, disregards the oppressive aspects of the rules but chooses to live with the sensory wonders of her spices. Her spice shop becomes a utopia for the ideal world of senses where spices of all kinds of colors, tastes, smells, feels, and melodies represent what Tilo desires the world to be like: a safe place for people of all races, cultures, colors, genders, and preferences. (Alam)

The Cost of Memory: Pain and Suffering

The work shows a number of problems, such as Jagjit's racial discrimination at school, Geeta's disagreement with her traditional grandfather, incidents of domestic violence, pay theft, and the deep sadness that many immigrants feel when they miss home. Divakaruni captures the exhaustion and disillusionment of these immigrants through Tilo's narration: "No one told us it would be so hard here in Amreekah, all day scrubbing greasy floors, lying under engines that drip black oil, driving the blenching monster trucks that coat our lungs with tar" (Divakaruni 62). Tilo's treatments utilise spices to make people feel better about themselves, mend damaged relationships, or give them the strength to leave situations where they are being hurt. As Sibtain Beg notes, "She is humane, and solves the problems of the people around her tirelessly. She gives spices as remedy to the customers, especially Indian immigrants, cures their ailments and social aloofness and alienation. She is life granter, hurts' healer, and hope giver. She is mistress of spices gifted with magical powers" (Sibtain Beg). Consequently, pain is regarded not solely as an individual experience, but as a result of racism, patriarchy, and relocation. S. Krishna S underscores this entrapment:

She is bound by the rules of prohibition ensuing from her traditional past which thwart her freedom given that she cannot leave her store, touch others, read, or even empathize with her customers. In fact, Tilo is merely a handmaiden of the spices, which in turn symbolize Indian cultural norms. She is ordained to abdicate her passions and, in the body of an old gnarled woman, live a sacrificial life controlled by the spices. Obviously, Tilo feels entrapped within her spice shop and subsequently struggles between the pull of the new world, America, which offers her freedom and autonomy, and that of traditional India, which confers to her immortality and magical powers. (S. Krishna S)

Being a Part of the Diaspora and Mixed Spices

Research on the diaspora has demonstrated that belonging transcends merely "returning" to a country. It also requires coping with delicate connections in regions where race, social inequity, and people moving between countries are frequent. Brah's idea of "diaspora space" shows how migrants and non-migrants can live together in different social spheres that are affected by imperial legacies and global capitalism. From this point of view, food and spices may be both stabilising and destabilising; they can help people feel linked to their ancestral culture while simultaneously being sites for mixing, replacing, and inventing new things.

The Creative Flight essay about *The Mistress of Spices'* culinary memory notes that Divakaruni's choice to utilise jalapeños instead of Indian green chillies is an example of Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity. In this discussion, the diasporic kitchen is like a lab where new flavours, issues with getting to them, and money problems transform "authentic" dishes while yet preserving a link to their cultural roots. This technique explains how Tilo's shop serves individuals from Gujarat, Punjab, Bengal, and other locations by employing a common spice vocabulary that makes people from diverse groups feel like they are all part of the same group.

Tilo and Raven, a Native American guy, are friends who live on both sides of the divide between India and America. Many critics say that one of the book's more ambitious ambitions is to juxtapose diaspora with indigeneity, which is like Raven's experience of losing his home and culture. The spices she presents him are more than just Indian symbols; they could potentially be ties between diverse histories of colonialism and strength. Divakaruni captures this longing through Tilo's inner voice:

American I too am looking. I thought all my looking was done when I found the spices but then I saw you and now I no longer know. I want to tell him this. I want to believe he'll understand. In my head an echo like a song of stone. A Mistress must carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves. It is my own voice, out of a time and place that seems so distant I want to call it not-real. To turn my back on it. But. (Divakaruni 69)

The store's destruction and Tilo's new name in the end might be seen as either a break from rigorous traditions and an embrace of a mixed future, or as the loss of an essential cultural memory institution. In both circumstances, spices are still crucial. They are the instruments Tilo has used to connect with and aid her community, and they are still indicators of continuity in her life, even though the Mistress's legendary structure has been broken down. As Krishna S observes, Tilo "inhabits a liminal space between the east and the west where she constantly negotiates with cultural codes in order to attain autonomy and identity" (Krishna S).

Conclusion: Memory in the Body

The Mistress of Spices shows that cultural memory lives on in both the body and stories. Divakaruni uses spices to create a sensory library that connects suffering, ritual, and belonging. As Kumar notes, the novel ultimately demonstrates that spices serve as instruments through which "exotic spices empower women to become feminist subjects" (Kumar) even as they bind them to tradition. Divakaruni broadens the scope of diaspora studies by focusing on the material and sensory aspects of memory, demonstrating that memory can be inhaled, tasted, and metabolised. The story ultimately contends that belonging in diaspora is characterised neither by complete integration nor by strict preservation. Cultural memory lasts through mingling, staying strong, and the smell of remembering that never goes away, just like spices.

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