



## THE FLAVOR OF ADAPTATION: EXPLORING THE SYMBOLISM OF SPICES IN *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

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### Abstract

*The novel, The Mistress of Spices by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores a magical plot where spices transcend mere culinary ingredients to embody profound cultural, emotional, and transformative symbolism. It is about the lives of people who oscillate between two different identities – their homeland and the United States. This paper also examines how spices function as metaphors for adaptation, identity negotiation, and postcolonial fortitude among the people of Indian diaspora in America. According to Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and the "third space," where the cultural interaction occurs, the analysis reveals spices as liminal agents bridging the Old World's traditions with the New World's modernity which is packed with anxiety and contradictory feelings. Through close reading and comparative textual analysis, this study argues that Divakaruni's spice symbolism evaluate the notions of authenticity, and insist that adaptation can be considered as a creative change in their thinking. Spices are aromatic and powerful; embodying the diasporic flavor of experience, specifically the tension between traditional Indian values and the pressures of assimilation in American society. Ultimately, the paper contributes to postcolonial analysis by framing spices as luminal agents of migration, elucidating the resilience and adaptability of immigrant communities.*

### Keywords

*Cultural Hybridity – Adaptation – Immigrants – Symbolism – Memory and Identity, etc.*

### Full Article

*The Mistress of Spices* novel is set against the backdrop of cultural displacement. The novel extends the complexities of identity, belonging, and trauma in the minds of the characters. Tilo, protagonist of the novel is a spice seller in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century San Francisco who possess mystical powers. Her bonding with the other women and her attempts to maintain links with India despite the long distance from her native land is a significant point to be noted. Using a postcolonial lens, the study evaluates the author's representation of the immigrant experience and analyzes her views on psychological challenges faced by people from different cultural backgrounds of people living in America. The paper argues that Divakaruni's portrayal of immigrant experiences offers a nuanced understanding of the emotional landscapes navigated by those living between cultures. Furthermore, the use of spices as symbols and food will be analyzed within the context of the importance of preserving traditions and memories.

### **Spices as Symbol and Sensorium in *The Mistress of Spices*:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni structures the novel around spice as central organizing force, underscoring their deep symbolic significance. Many of the novel's chapters take their names after individual spices - Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, Asafoetida, Fennel, and so on, each chapter shows a distinct emotional or ritual role in the narrative.

Tilo, an immortal Mistress of Spices living in Oakland, California was trained on a remote island and bound by ancient vows. However, her own journey exposes the instability of diasporic



identity. Her opening declaration as “I am a Mistress of Spices” (Divakaruni 3) she establishes her role early, positioning her as both guardian and servant to the spices’ sentient powers. She sells spices and also offers counselling to immigrant customers struggling with displacement, identity crises, and the pressures of assimilation in America. Tilo’s name is drawn directly from ‘til’- the sesame seed, which has the nature of nourishment and restoration, establishing the most intimate and foundational layer of spice symbolism. So, her identity is inseparable from the spices she serves. They function not merely as tools but as extensions of her own being.

The Spices symbolize cultural heritage and identity and act simultaneously as agents of embodied transformation, reflecting what Rakhi Mondal calls an “interconnected oppression of women and nature” under patriarchal and capitalist systems (Mondal 384). For example, the intake of Fennel digests sorrow and makes the eater strong. It serves also as an equalizer which can transfer power from one person to another when shared. Tilo offers it to Ahuja’s wife for mental fortitude, cooled temper and a rebalancing of domestic power. In this way, the spices materialize the ‘diasporic flavor’ - a combination of nostalgia, loss, and rejuvenation. Through Tilo and the spices, the writer exposes how sensory, cultural and emotional experience remains inseparable for those living between two places.

### **Spices as Cultural Memory and Embodied Heritage:**

In this occult narrative, spices are not introduced as mere passive material with culinary roles but celebrated as living entities with voices, personalities, and demands. They become profound symbols of cultural, emotional, and transformative power. As Divakaruni pointed out in an interview, “For many Indian immigrants, food constitutes one of the few things they hope to be able to carry forward that’s relatively easy to recreate,”. Tilo expresses her notion on Turmeric:

When I hold it in my hands, the spice speaks to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the world. I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the nectar and before the poison and thus lie in between. Yes, I whisper, swaying to its rhythm. Yes. You are turmeric, shield for heart’s sorrow, anointment for death, hope for rebirth (Divakaruni, 13-14).

Turmeric’s dual symbolism is highlighted through the words of Tilo. It heals physical and emotional wounds for immigrants suffering from alienation, yet it demands strict adherence to Tilo’s vows of detachment. Turmeric, for instance, appears not only as a medicinal balm but as a protection for sorrow and hope of rebirth. When Tilo offers turmeric to her customers, she connects them to rituals practiced in India: “It is put for luck on the heads of the unborn, sprinkled at pujas over coconut, rubbed into the boundaries of fresh and even married saris” (Suganya and Rajeswari 31). Turmeric thus becomes what Prabhat Kumar terms an “edible archive” of cultural memory, helping immigrants “manage suffering, rituals, and belonging” in the United States (Kumar, 34).

Similar symbolism is significant across other spices also, each linking to specific struggles of the immigrants. Saffron is associated with “forbidden love” represents passion that breaks social constraints. Tilo’s attraction to Raven, a Native American man who visits her shop is prominent. He challenges the promise made by Tilo to avoid personal desire. Saffron’s golden appeal reflects the seductive attraction of cross-cultural romance, bridging Indian mysticism with American individualism. When Tilo contemplates using saffron, the narrative implies its power to ignite desires that bridge yet threaten cultural boundaries. Similarly, cayenne with its “blister-red skin” symbolizes courage amid violence and loss. Customers like the battered wife Geeta or



Haroun, a youth entangled in gang life receive cayenne-infused remedies that require inner strength to confront domestic abuse or dangers in gang violence.

### **Adaptation, Hybridity, and the “Diasporic Flavor”:**

Beyond gender and memory, symbolic use of spices directly addresses the question of adaptation. Homi Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity provides the theoretical backbone for this analysis. In *The Location of Culture*, his notion of the “third space” of enunciation helps illuminate how spices mediate between the Indian heritage and the American present (Bhabha, 36–37). The ‘third space’ is the site where cultural interaction produces new meanings, neither purely original nor imitative. Tilo’s shop located neither fully in India nor in the mainstream, serves as a site where Indian immigrants negotiate hybrid identity. Kumar observes that Divakaruni’s use of jalapenos instead of Indian green chilies exemplifies Bhabha’s “interstitial” cultural practice, where the diasporic palate accepts substitution without abandoning meaning (Kumar, 35).

When Tilo uses asafoetida to ward off evil for a customer haunted by homeland traumas, the spice’s pungent “blow to the throat” (Divakaruni, 134) symbolizes the painful wisdom of diaspora. The recovery from such problems becomes possible by confronting certain loss. Ginger also offers insight into the future but comes with a price of “anxiety and contradictory feelings” of cultural displacement. These incidents evoke sensory memory, recalling the “aromatic and powerful” quality attributed to the spices, which reminds the readers that exile is tasted, smelled, and embodied. Divakaruni’s magical realism, blending Ayurveda, Buddhist lore, and American realism, heightens this: spices are “citizens of the world,” universal yet tied to Indian origins, challenging essentialist views of culture (Divakaruni).

Tilo herself exemplifies this idea of adaptation and hybridity. She was born as Nayantara in India, renamed and transformed through her mistress training, and now runs a shop in America, torn between moral obligation and personal longing. Her transgressions unfold gradually, driven by compassion for her immigrant customers and more dangerously, by her growing love for Raven, the ‘lonely American’. The most sacred and irreversible violation occurs when Tilo uses the spices for herself. She consumes Makaradwaj, the ‘King among Spices’, to shed her aged body and become young and beautiful. Her desire to leave the shop and pursue a relationship with Raven becomes an act of defiance. This act pushes her to break the spices’ rules, resulting in the catastrophic earthquake that destroys her shop. These violations expose the novel’s tension between duty and desire, tradition and individual agency. Tilo’s evolution “from a duty-bound Mistress to an autonomous woman serves as a broader commentary on the significance of self-invention in the third space” (Ramya, 3). The climax of the novel suggests that adaptation is not something that happens once and forever but it is a cyclical and continuous process which keeps changing in each environment.

*The Mistress of Spices* contributes to postcolonial literature by presenting spices as strong metaphors for the “flavor of adaptation.” Through its vivid, sensory language and in depth mythic notions, the text celebrates immigrant resilience, insisting a significant idea that adaptation is not loss but the most potent spice of all. Tilo gives up immortality and chooses mortal love, her body started aging as the spices release her. This resolution frames spices not as rigid anchors but as “luminal agents of migration, offering insights into the resilience and adaptability of immigrant communities.”

The novel redefines “diaspora” through spices as tools for psychological healing and as bridge between tradition and modernity. Healing is exhibited as an interconnected, multi-dimensional process which is possible with the understanding of culture, spirituality and adaptability. The powers are never free of cost and healing often demands sacrifice which mirror’s the novel’s great exploration of the price of change. In Homi Bhabha’s terms, the third space



enables “mimicry” and subversion, that helps immigrants to “insist adaptation” without abandoning their origins. The article concludes that spices’ cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction parallel the immigrant journey of rupture and renewal, ultimately envisioning a more hybrid, ethical future where memory, gender, and environment are reconsidered together.

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